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CHRISTMAS 1900.

FOR THE SAKE OF A KISS.

A TALE OF THE SIEGE OF PARIS.

By ANDREW W. ARNOLD,

AUTHOR OF 'THE ATTACK ON THE FARM,' ETC.

CHAPTER I.



WHEN the *réveille* rang out sharp and clear on the 21st of December, and I woke and saw above me, by the light of a dim lantern, the smutty girders of the engine-shed where we had passed the night, and not far off a cuirassed locomotive like some grimy goblin in the semi-darkness, I thought at first that I must still be dreaming. Then I remembered the events of the previous day: how we Mobiles of the Seine-Inférieure, who were quartered to the west of Paris near Boulogne, had received orders to march up to St Denis, and how we, grumbling and swearing at our fate, had arrived there the night before.

'Wake up, you sluggards,' cried Sergeant Mordoni, coming along with a lantern; 'wake up, I say. I guess some of you won't have the chance to-morrow.'

Ma foi, how we all hated that man! I never met any one who had a more fiendish disposition, though I will admit that we all had a certain admiration for the little brute. He had been in the Zouaves, and he wore on his breast the Crimean and Italian medals. If mere courage had been the only requisite, he must

have had a commission long ago; but there was something against him which none of us could find out. Some said he had made love to an officer's wife, which was very likely; for he was extremely handsome, and he had such insinuating manners and was such an accomplished liar that women adored him, and fell easy victims to his wiles. I can see him now strutting off, twisting his ferocious moustache and puffing out his chest, on those rare occasions when he got leave to go within the fortifications to spend the money which many of us conscripts found it worth our while to give him, for he soon made our lives a burden to us if we did not.

I had at first furnished him with many a five-franc piece; but I had no longer any need to do so, as I was a corporal. During the night attack on L'Hay on the 1st of December (which was merely a feint to keep the Prussians in their positions whilst Ducrot was getting his men over the Marne for the great sortie against Champigny on the 2nd), I had rescued Captain Lebedoyère, who commanded my company, and had been promoted, so that the little sergeant had not so much power over me.

Stiff and numbed by the extreme cold, I roused myself and looked around me. Still sleeping peacefully by my side, I saw my comrade Claude Lefebvre. Poor fellow! I could

hardly bring myself to wake him, for bronchitis had kept him awake the greater part of the night. I had begged him the previous day to go into the hospital, and he would have done so; but then the order came for us to march, and, in spite of my remonstrances, he had not the moral courage to stay behind, as he feared it would look like shamming, now that we were going under fire.

It was perfectly dark outside; and as the men sat shivering round partaking of their *café* they bitterly cursed those who were sending us on what they considered a fool's errand, which they felt certain would end in disaster. Though I did not believe that we should meet with any success, I rather looked forward to this sortie, as it might give me a further opportunity of distinguishing myself.

Four years ago I had wished to marry a very charming and lovely girl named Lucienne Colmart. My family would not agree to the marriage, as they did not think her *dot* was large enough. I was studying for the Bar at the Sorbonne then. However, I was determined not to give up Lucienne, and I worked hard, resolving by my own exertions to rise in my profession, and marry her when I could afford to do so; for after I was twenty-five, by our law, I could marry as I liked; no *conseil de famille* could then prevent me. But, alas! she died two years ago, and I felt from that time that I had nothing more to live for. I became savage and reckless, brooding over my misfortune one moment, and flying into dissipation the next in order to make me forget it. So, while my comrades sat growling over their *café*, I remained silent and absorbed in my own reflections.

'It is no good your grumbling, *mes enfants*; it's all in Trochu's plan,' remarked the sergeant, with a twinkle in his bright, little, cunning Italian eyes. Trochu's grand 'plan' was now a byword; and the sergeant knew, though we were cowed and frozen, that any allusion to it would bring on a heated discussion.

'I have got a plan too,' said Grenier; 'and that would be to make those scribblers who are now in their beds, and who spend their time guzzling and drinking absinthe in warm *cafés* while we are getting frozen to death, just march in front of us. I reckon that would cool them a little, and put some sense into their heads.'

'Yes,' observed Beldart, 'and some of those windbags at Belleville too; a dose of Prussian lead would do them good.'

'Ah, *mes moutons*!' said Mordoni, with a fiendish chuckle, 'you don't like going into the *abattoir*—*hein*? Well, it's soon over. The Prussian'—

As he spoke the 'assembly' sounded; and, strapping on our knapsacks, we ran out into a yard, where we found our colonel on his dappled grey awaiting us. When the roll was

called it was found that a few were missing, some having taken advantage of our new *locale* to desert. In our old quarters this was not an easy thing to do, as it was extremely difficult to get permission to go within the fortifications; but in a large place like St Denis it was not so difficult. It was reported that a poor fellow on sentry duty, who did not answer to his name, had been found bolt upright, frozen to death at his post. This was not the first fatality from that cause, and the occurrence did not tend to raise our spirits.

It must have been about eight o'clock when an aide-de-camp arrived.

'Fours. By your right; march!' shouted our commander.

One naturally expected the *tambours* to strike up; but all was silent.

'We are going to surprise them,' said the sergeant; and so it proved.

We soon found ourselves in what appeared to be the main street, not far from the Abbey; and our progress for a time was delayed by the terrible confusion which reigned there. Ambulances, that should have been in the rear, were all mixed up with the artillery and ammunition-wagons. In the midst of the turmoil, whilst surgeons and drivers were swearing on every side, General Vinoy and his *état-major* rode up; and Mordoni pointed out Admiral de la Roncière, General La Vognet, and others. I recognised General Dumoulin, who commanded our brigade. The 10th, 12th, 13th, and 14th battalions of the Mobiles of the Seine, as well as some of the National Guard of St Denis, took part in the operations which were to follow; but to this day I am not certain what regiments were included in our brigade.

A signal-gun boomed out, and by going down a by-street we soon got into the open fields. The fog was so dense that we could not see fifty metres in front of us, but we knew we were going in the direction of Le Bourget. We had with us two naval officers from Fort St Denis (which was manned by sailors) who knew the ground well. They had taken part in the fight at Le Bourget when it was attacked and taken by the Prussian Guard on the 28th of October. Our company was on the extreme left of the battalion, and I was on the left of my section.

'What earthly good shall we gain by taking that infernal place?' remarked Grenier.

'Stop that talking there,' said the sergeant sharply, in a loud whisper; and in grim silence we went on through the mist at the double. There was no mistake now about what Mordoni had said of our intending to take the village by surprise, for not a shot had been fired from the forts to cover our advance. On and on we went over the frozen fields, when suddenly a harsh voice shouted through the fog, 'Halt! Werda?'

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No answer was returned. Nothing broke the stillness but the patter of our feet on the crisp snow and the rattle of the cartridges in their gibernes. Then, not a hundred metres in front of us, we saw half-a-dozen bright flashes; and Beldart, who was close to me, was hit, and a man behind him fell to the ground. The effect of the shot on the former was extraordinary, and I could not have believed the result if I had not seen it, for he sprang into the air without uttering a cry, rushed forward, then, turning like a rabbit, ran into the midst of us and made his way to the rear. He was hit slightly on the elbow; and he told me afterwards that he felt as if he had received an electric shock, and for the time being did not know what he was about.

'*En avant, mes enfants* ; but don't fire,' said our captain in a low tone.

At this juncture we saw our colonel suddenly pull up his horse, and then canter away to the right. It was evident he perceived something that was not visible to us. This caused some confusion, as some naturally followed him. Even Captain Lebedoyère seemed undecided; but the old sergeant was not deceived. 'Bah!' he muttered, 'it's only a wall;' and, taking our cue from him, we kept straight on, and soon found he was right. As we scrambled over this obstacle which enclosed the little garden of the cottage, in which the Prussian *feldwacht* was located, we received another volley from them ere they retreated from the house on their supports. The *piket* or *repli*, with the Germans, was the remainder of the company that furnished the advanced posts; it was established in the rear, but somewhat on the flank, so as not to be in the way if the *feldwacht* had to retreat.

Thus it happened that, owing to Mordoni's prescience, our company was really the first to reach the cottage. I was well in front with my squad, and as we followed the Prussians the colonel came galloping up. I chanced to be nearest him when he did so; and, seeing me well in advance, he remembered it afterwards. To the right we suddenly heard the rattle of musketry, which showed that some other regiment had also come to close-quarters with our foes; and immediately afterwards the shells came whistling over our heads from the fortress of St Denis, and the fire was taken up by the Forts de l'Est and Aubervilliers. Silence was now no longer necessary, so the drums beat the *pas de charge*; and, excited by their stirring rattle, we wretched, half-starved Mobiles forgot our troubles, and like hounds followed on the track of the retreating Germans, who, taken completely by surprise, fled before us. So we drove them with little loss through some gardens and houses towards the village.

'*Allons, mes braves!*' shouted Mordoni, his 1900.]

bright eyes glistening with excitement; 'follow them up.' Thoroughly roused and elated, and perhaps surprised, at our success, we needed no encouragement, and soon we saw Le Bourget itself in front of us. We had got to the bottom of the main street near the church, and were fighting our way into the houses, from which the Prussians poured a murderous fire into us, when, as I was trying to smash in a door with the butt-end of my rifle, a shell fell on the roof of the house, sending down a shower of tiles, one of which struck me on the head, and I remembered nothing more.

When I came to my senses I was so stiff with the cold and my head was so confused that at first I could hardly move. A comrade was groaning near me, and another lying on his face in the middle of the street, the snow around him dyed with blood. I sat and stared at these poor fellows; but the mental effort to recollect who they were was too great, and I sank to the ground again. Then I remembered I had a flask of cognac, and after a draught I felt stronger, and began to tie a handkerchief round my forehead. I had hardly done so when I heard a rush of feet, and the next moment Grenier was stooping over me.

'Come on, *caporal*,' he shouted; 'it's all up. The devils will be on us in a moment.'

With his assistance I got on to my legs, and, holding his arm, staggered on after a whole troop of panic-stricken Mobiles running towards Corneneuf. My head was in a whirl. I knew not what I was doing; my only idea was to get out of danger.

'I thought you were done for when I saw you fall,' he exclaimed as we hurried along, and then he went on to speak of the glass-factory, the cemetery, and the gas-works; but his remarks were mere words to me, as my mind was too confused to follow his explanations.

'Leave me,' I said when we had got some distance; 'I can keep up no longer.' The exertion had reopened the wound, and I could feel the warm blood trickling down my neck.

'Well, just come this way, then,' he said; and going down a lane, I got into a field at the bottom of a garden near the entrance of the village of Corneneuf, where he placed me against a wall. I reckon it was about eleven then. The shells from the fort that covered our retreat went hurtling and shrieking across the leaden sky overhead, and an intermittent rifle-fire still continued, and I seemed to hear them as I lay. After that I must have fainted from loss of blood; for when I came to my senses the sun on that the shortest day of the year was setting over Clichy, and but for an occasional boom from Fort Valérien all was still. It was bitterly cold, and the wonder is

I was not frozen to death as our poor sentry had been the previous night.

I determined, after drinking some of the raw spirit in my flask, to make an effort to reach the village. I had not gone far when whom should I see lying on the ground with his arm bound up but Claude Lefebre. I loved the young fellow; he was so good-hearted, so gentle, and withal so clever. Even with the roughest and most brutal among us he was a favourite.

Lefebre and I had been a short time fellow-students at the Sorbonne, though I cannot say I saw very much of him in those days, as he came after the death of my *fiancée*. I was rich, and he was poor. We mixed in very different sets: I among the wildest, and he among the most studious. Besides this, he did not complete his course, as his father, a small country attorney, died, and he had to get his living, and help to provide for his mother and younger brothers. He was always fond of art, and the proprietor of a large wall-paper manufactory, recognising his abilities, took him for a designer. In fact, so highly did Lefebre's employer think of him that, just before the war broke out, he allowed Lefebre to become betrothed to his daughter, although Claude had nothing but his ability to rely on. I had quite lost sight of him till the war commenced; then, to our mutual surprise, we found ourselves drafted into the same regiment, and in the same squad, and our early friendship was renewed.

I feared when I first saw him, so pallid was his face, that he was dead; but on hearing my voice he looked up. The spirit I poured down his throat revived him a little, and with some difficulty I got him as far as Corneneuf. I wonder now how I found the strength to do so, but in helping him I forgot my own troubles.

'I can't go any farther, my dear fellow,' he said softly. 'It's not the wound; but I cannot get my breath. Oh, *mon Dieu!*' he gasped, 'it's a shame to have brought us up here.'

As the poor fellow was speaking I saw through the deepening gloom a number of men round some object in a field in front of us, which I soon perceived was the carcass of a horse that they were hacking to pieces and carrying into a cottage near.

With a mighty effort I succeeded in half-leading, half-carrying my dying comrade into the little house. Those inside had broken up a door and were cooking the reeking flesh on their bayonets. For the most part they eyed us like snarling dogs with a bone; but finding that we wanted no place by the fire, nor any of their food, they paid no further attention to us. Passing into an inner room, I placed Lefebre gently on the bare boards. I could tell by his laboured breathing that the end was near, and

I wiped the moisture from my eyes as I thought of his mother and his *fiancée*; he was always speaking of the latter, and I had often seen her photograph. I was oppressed, too, by the knowledge that nothing I was able to do could save him. The vile oaths of our starving comrades, as they gorged themselves and quarrelled over their horrible meal, angered and annoyed me; but Claude was unaffected by their noise; he, alas! was too far gone for that, and had sunk into a sort of coma. I expected every moment that the pulse I held would cease to beat. Just, however, at the last he rallied for a moment, and with an effort signified he had something to say.

'Jean,' he murmured faintly as I bent down beside him, 'there's a letter for Elise in my pocket. Make sure she gets it. Tell Hubert and Jacques to be good lads, and take care of mother. Tell her,' he continued with a tremulous voice, 'not to mind, and say that we shall meet'— But he broke down here entirely. I could not be certain of his last words, but they sounded like 'in heaven.' Then the death-rattle commenced, and after a few moments of agony he fell back in my arms a corpse. Taking the letter and some trinkets from his pocket, sick at heart I went out into the cold night, for I could not bear to stay in that horrible place any longer, haunted as I was by his dying words and the ribald jokes of the brutes in the other room.

As I was going into the village I passed a small group of German prisoners waiting to be sent into Paris, where their arrival might soften, perhaps, the failure of our useless sortie. They were splendid men, with E. R. (Elizabethan Regiment of the Guard) on their shoulder-straps. As they stood there, speaking a barbarous tongue and moodily smoking their great china pipes, they looked like grim giants compared with the little *lignards* who were guarding them. I regarded these German soldiers with interest, for I had never been able to observe them before at my leisure; but it was so cold that I soon went on to the first *café* in sight. There I found two men, Ravol and Perraud, belonging to my regiment. Both of them were *mauvais sujets*, and the latter was already half-drunk. They had with them two bundles of clothes, and I guessed at once they were going to desert.

'Hullo, *caporal*,' they said, 'where have you been?'

'With poor Lefebre.'

'Ah! that's how it is, then, that you have missed our fellows; they left for our old quarters nearly an hour ago, and you had better follow as soon as you can, for the chances are you will be made sergeant now Mordoni's done for.'

'Is Mordoni dead?'

'Yes,' replied Ravol; 'and a precious good [Christmas Number.]'

thing, too. Do you know this?' he continued, producing a heavy purse which I recognised as belonging to the late sergeant.

'How did it happen?' I asked.

'Well, we were up by the glass-factory, and he was climbing over a low wall, and I was close behind him. 'Come on,' he shouted; but just then I heard the whiz of a shell. Thinking the confounded thing was going to fall on me, I crouched down, and it took his head clean off and burst in a field beyond.'

'I am hardly likely to get his place,' I said.

'Bonnet and Marly are my seniors.'

'Bonnet got a bullet in his ankle, and I saw the other on the ground.'

I quite understood their anxiety to get rid of me; but their wishes coincided with my own. I longed to be promoted, as it would give me far greater liberty.

On my paying outrageously for it, the landlord had given me a little rice and also some bread; so, fortified by this and a bottle of wine, I set off for Boulogne.

I took my bearings by the electric light, which I could distinguish through the fog as it shone from the Fort de l'Esté. The road was like iron, and my fingers tingled with the bitter cold. I had crossed the rail and got on to the Neuilly road—for it was out of the question at that time to enter the city—when I fell in with a soldier driving an empty ammunition-cart. For a franc, the man, who appeared either drunk or half-asleep—at least so it seemed to me—agreed to give me a lift; so, getting inside, I made myself as comfortable as I could. We must have gone a good distance, when suddenly we came into collision with some permanent structure, and I was very nearly pitched out.

'Where on earth are you driving?' I exclaimed ruefully as soon as I could collect my scattered senses. But no answer came to my question. It was very dark and foggy, and impossible to see a metre in front. On getting down I found we had broken a wheel by running against a demolished wall.

'What's the good of sitting there?' I shouted angrily to the driver as he remained on the box. Still he did not answer; and going nearer and after striking a match, I was horrified by his fixed, ghastly stare, for I realised then that the poor wretch had been frozen to death. The reins hung loosely in one hand, while he still grasped the coin I had given him in the other. Fearing the horse might share its master's fate, I cut the traces, and, filled with a horrible dread—for I was haunted by the man's white face—hurried away I knew not where.

Never in all my life do I remember such intense cold. The journal of an aide-de-camp states: 'La nuit fut terrible; je ne me souviens pas d'avoir eu aussi froid que dans les galopades qui me furent imposées le soir. Les hommes 1900.]

gelaient littéralement dans les tranchées.' As a child I had heard my grandfather speak of the retreat from Moscow, when men killed the horses and got inside them for warmth; but I could imagine nothing worse than I now experienced. With hands and feet benumbed with cold, and devoid of all feeling, I staggered over the frozen snow. To add to my difficulties, I had not the least idea where I was going, and I bitterly blamed myself for not remaining in the *café*. I thought of poor Lefebvre, and wondered if I was destined soon to join him. At all costs, as long as my strength remained, I determined to keep moving, though more than once a sleepy feeling came over me, and I felt inclined to lie down on the snow and let death come and end my sufferings.

On and on I went, feeling every moment I was getting weaker. Once through the stillness I thought I heard some voices, and called out; but there was no reply to my shouts. Then I found myself stumbling over the stumps of some trees. They were so numerous that it occurred to me—and as it happened I was right—that I was in what had formerly been the Bois de Boulogne. This thought gave me fresh hope, and I made to the left to avoid the river and to reach our trenches; but in the utter darkness I think I must have kept going round in a circle. I felt I could not go on much longer. I was filled with an overpowering feeling of despair, when suddenly close to me I saw a gleam of light shining through the chink of a shutter. Feeling the walls, I came to a door, against which I knocked as loudly as the little strength I had remaining permitted. There was a stir inside, and in another moment a grille in the door was opened.

'Who are you? What do you want?' asked a soft contralto voice.

'My name is Jean Aymard,' I replied. 'I am wounded, and I've lost my way. For heaven's sake let me in, or tell me where I am!'

'Poor wretch!' I heard another girl whisper.

'He cannot be a mere soldier; I am certain of that by his voice. Perhaps, Lola, he's an officer. Father, may we let him in?'

'Yes,' replied a deep voice. 'It's enough to kill a dog out there.'

The bolts were drawn, and staggering in, I found myself in a small kitchen. The younger girl gave a cry as she saw me, and no wonder, for I must have appeared a terrible object. I had got some of the blood off my face in the *café*, but the bandages were soaked, and I was covered with snow and dirt. I was so dazzled and confused by the light, poor as it really was, that I could not at first see at all; but as I got accustomed to it I saw a handsome, white-haired old man seated on a sofa, with a couple of crutches beside him, and on a table within easy reach was a revolver. Though faint and dizzy, I was struck at once by the extreme beauty of

his daughters, more especially that of the elder, who appeared about nineteen. I was in no state to reason; but as I gazed at the splendid figures of the two girls, and their dark hair and fine eyes, their faces somehow seemed strangely familiar to me.

'Run and get some food, Marie,' said the father rather sharply to the younger of the two; 'the poor devil is half-frozen. He will be all right when he has had something to eat.'

I fear I ate like a wolf, and it was not until I had nearly finished the pile of rice and potatoes they set before me that the thought suddenly occurred to me that perhaps my kind benefactors had not enough for themselves.

'No, no!' I exclaimed, pushing the plate away. 'I can't take your food from you in this way. You have given me shelter, and that's enough.'

'Don't let that trouble you, my good fellow,' observed the old officer, for such I found him to be. 'We have plenty of what we have given you; it's meat we want.' But for all that I did not feel comfortable, and left the remainder till the next day.

'Now, I'll bathe your forehead,' said the elder sister.

I was so overcome by their kindness, and the beautiful girl seemed so like some ministering angel, that I could hardly keep the tears of gratitude from my eyes, and I should have liked to have kissed the little hands that tied the bandages so tenderly.

Under the comfortable influence of my new surroundings I soon felt better, and my host began to question me eagerly about the day's operations, showing a knowledge that soon convinced me that he was, as I already suspected, himself a soldier. Meanwhile the two girls had taken their places opposite to me, and I found it difficult to take my eyes off them, for I was becoming more and more certain that I had seen them before.

'Tell me,' at last I asked, 'where am I, and to whom am I indebted for all this kindness?'

'Father is Colonel Courtois,' replied the elder sister.

The mystery was clear now. I understood everything.

'Ah!' I exclaimed, 'then I am in La Maisonette, and you are *La Belle Hélène*?'

'*La Belle Hélène*?' she replied, with a puzzled look, and the little room rang with her silvery laugh, in which her sister joined. 'Whoever can have told you that? *Ma foi*, no! my name is Lola, and my sister's is Marie.'

'Well, anyway, that is what we soldiers call you,' I answered, 'for I must tell you that I belong to the regiment of Mobs that occupies the houses and trenches behind your house; and I can assure you, mademoiselle,' I continued, with a smile, 'that I have often watched you and your sister through the loopholed walls with a field-glass I bought on purpose.'

CHAPTER II.



It is necessary that I should explain how it was that the old colonel should have been allowed to occupy a house standing directly between our advanced posts and those of the Prussians, when all the others had been pulled down. The villa was, it is true, of no strategical value, lying as it did in a slight hollow, and consequently not interfering with the fire of either the battery to the south-east of the Bois de Boulogne to the right or the one at Billeancourt behind it to the left, both of which covered the Pont de Sèvres; but this would not have been sufficient to prevent the demolition of the little house had there not been very peculiar extraneous circumstances.

In the Mexican campaign Colonel Courtois had the misfortune to lose both his legs, and it happened that a similar piece of bad luck happened to another officer of the same grade. The latter, though he had not rendered anything like the same services to his country as Colonel Courtois, who had served with distinction in the Crimea and in Italy, through court influence received an extra pension and was made a brevet-general. These honours falling to the share of his Mexican comrade, while he was put on the retired list without even being mentioned in the despatches, filled the colonel with disgust. I will not deny that he had not his idiosyncrasies, and that he was naturally very hot-tempered. He took violent likes and dislikes, and his enemies—who were not few, for he had a sharp tongue and a venomous pen—insinuated that mentally he was a little deranged, though I never heard of any one who had the courage to tell him this to his face. Embittered by his misfortunes, he turned a violent Republican. From his little villa at Boulogne he wrote violent articles against the Government, and his house soon became the rendezvous of those who were equally discontented. It was matter of surprise that he, like many others, was not sent across the frontier. In spite of all that was said, he was really no fool, and he never wrote or spoke on any subject that he had not thoroughly mastered. The state of the army was a favourite topic with him, and it was some able articles he wrote on that subject that led to his becoming an intimate friend of General Trochu, who, as all the world knows, had written on the same topic. Thus it came to pass that when, after Sedan, the already tottering imperial dynasty was overthrown and Trochu made Governor of Paris, the colonel was enabled to remain where he was.

Our regiment occupied the houses and trenches immediately opposite the park of St Cloud, to the right of the Pont de Sèvres, which was not

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entirely destroyed, for it was at this point that the *parlementaires* were held, each end respectively being carefully barricaded and guarded by ourselves and the Germans. The river, of course, ran between us, making the neutral ground between the *avant postes* about six hundred metres.

The colonel's property, which faced the loop-holed walls of the park, behind which the Germans kept incessant watch, was about midway between us; but the villa itself was considerably nearer to them than to us—in fact, hardly two hundred metres. Needless to say, among us soldiers there were wonderful tales about the eccentric old soldier. It was reported that he had hoards of food, enough to last him a year, and some said gold too; and that it was owing to his fabulous wealth that he enjoyed the unique satisfaction of being allowed to remain. More than once I had heard it proposed that we should go to the villa one dark night *en masse* and take what we could; and it was only the fear of the old officer's influential friends that prevented some of our half-famished men from doing so. One evening General Vinoy himself paid the colonel a visit, and our own colonel sometimes went to see him; but otherwise the family were entirely isolated.

What was most extraordinary—and this we Mobiles were often puzzled over—was the fact that the Prussians should have respected the house and those who were in it. This naturally gave rise to all manner of tales. It was said that at the commencement of the siege a young Prince who had seen one of the girls fishing was so surprised and captivated by her beauty that he had fallen madly in love with her. I learnt from the girls afterwards that there was some truth in this story; for one day soon after our troops were driven in on 18th September at Bagneux, some German officers had actually seen the old colonel seated in his wheeled chair on the river-bank, with his daughters, coolly fishing, and had watched them through their glasses. I reckon, however, if the house had interfered at all with the fire of one of their batteries, the Prussians would not have allowed any sentiment to prevent them knocking it to pieces.

Like two cats, we French and Germans watched each other without ceasing. The glimpse of a *pickelhaube* drew the fire of half-a-dozen chassepots; and if, for amusement, we placed a shako on a bayonet just above a wall, it was not long ere the large bullets of a needle-gun went through it, for the Germans, like ourselves, by continual practice, got to be really splendid marksmen. Yet sometimes, when all was comparatively quiet, the colonel's daughters, tired, I suppose, of keeping in their own walled garden, would actually come out and walk about between us. I was in the guard-room the first time I heard of their doing this, and could not believe it till I saw them strolling about as
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coolly as if they were in the Champs Elysées. A halo of romance from that time appeared to hover over these two beautiful, fearless creatures. Safe in their womanhood, they seemed to think no harm could possibly come to them. We French were naturally proud of them; their courage flattered our *amour propre*; and as our enemies respected them, not a shot was fired by either side while they were in sight.

It was not astonishing, in these circumstances, that I should have felt surprised and delighted at finding myself actually in the presence of the two girls whose beauty I had so often admired at a distance, and which on a nearer inspection I found was even more striking than I, in my most fervent moments, had ever imagined.

'Now,' said my host, 'you take that sofa under the window, which I use in the daytime when I read.' He threw me a great bearskin rug, and I wrapped myself in it and was soon asleep.

When I awoke the next day it must have been near eleven. Stepping very lightly, I saw in the dim light—for they had not drawn the curtains—Lola arranging the table for *déjeuner*. Without moving my position, with half-closed eyes I followed the movements of the unconscious girl. It seemed as if my dear Lucienne had come to earth again, for Lola had the same graceful figure. Her hair, coiled in thick masses on her small, shapely head, was certainly darker, for it had the blue-blackness of a raven's wing. There was, however, in her dark-blue eyes a touch of sadness, which, though it etherealised her beauty, seemed in one so young almost unnatural, and contrasted forcibly with the small, full mouth that seemed to be made only for smiles and laughter.

She had just finished her duties when her father and sister came in, and after they had congratulated me on my improved appearance, we all sat down to our frugal *déjeuner*. I soon felt at my ease, and it was not long before they got all my story from me. I showed them the miniature of my poor Lucienne, which I always wore round my neck; and both Marie and the colonel were struck by the remarkable resemblance it bore to Mademoiselle Courtois.

Though I was very much better, I still felt weak and heavy.

'You are not fit for duty yet,' remarked my host. 'You had better stay with us to-day; and besides,' he added, 'it will be a kindness, as this life is terribly monotonous for the girls; it is something for them to have any one to talk to. I wish now that I had insisted on their going into Paris; but you know how obstinate women are.'

'When they think they are in the right,' I answered—'which,' I added dryly, turning to Mademoiselle Lola, 'I have sometimes known them to be.'

'Now, you have just spoilt your remark by

'your last sentence,' she answered, with a laugh. 'It shows you must be better, or you would not say such horrid things.'

'Do men always say horrid things when they are well?' But I got no answer to this.

I did not require any pressing to stay in such charming company, and the day passed only too quickly. It was very interesting for me to see from the top windows of the little house our own and the Prussian positions; the battered villas, our long line of entrenchments, the fortifications behind them, the Arc de Triomphe, and in the distance the gold dome of the Invalides just showing through the mist. The two girls told me all about their fishing, which now they had had to give up on account of the severe weather, and how they had struck up an acquaintance with the Prussian outposts, who, following their example, would slip out sometimes on a very dark night and put down lines for eels. Marie was a rare mimic, and she imitated the bad French of our foes exactly as they asked across the water in the dark what luck they had. I laughed heartily, too, as they explained their father's elaborate methods for catching rats, though they denied emphatically my soft impeachment that they ate them too.

'Hark!' exclaimed Marie as we were talking; 'do you hear their bugles? It is twelve o'clock; the Prussians are going to change the guard. Come upstairs, M. Aymard, and you can see them.'

'You have no idea,' said Lola as I stood, an interested spectator of the methodical proceedings of our foes, 'what splendid practice these men—they are Wurtembergers—make with their rifles. We had a small mirror outside a window, abutting upon the road, which in ordinary times enabled us to see who passed. Well, one morning we heard them firing systematically, and we could not imagine for what reason till we found they were making a target of the mirror, which glistened in the sun. Would you believe it, though it is so small, they smashed it all to pieces, and the zinc frame that held the glass was perforated with bullets.'

As Lola told me that story I little thought how my future life would be affected by the German adroitness in hitting that horrible little mirror.

I found the colonel most excellent company. He had seen a great deal of the world. He was well read, too; for, being of course obliged to lead a sedentary life, he spent much time among his books, and his library was extensive and the books well selected. I found that he had known my mother's family at Blois, where his regiment was quartered before he went to Mexico. Thus the day passed very pleasantly, and it seemed to me, so much did I feel at home, that at the end of it I had known the family for years.

In the evening Lola, who had a fine contralto

voice, sang some songs. From a boy I was passionately fond of music, and, to the surprise of the two girls, I sat down and played the music of a ballet that I was fortunate to get performed at a small theatre on the *rive gauche*.

'*Ma foi!*' Marie said. 'Why, I have that music. Do you mean to say you wrote it? It is lucky you did not hear me play it. Do you find it easy to write?'

'It is merely the case of a lovely face,' I answered. 'You and your sister would inspire a sphinx. Half the so-called "impromptus" that are written,' I added, with a smile, 'from their laboured harmonies, must take some days to write. Now, mademoiselle, give me any words you like, and I will see what I can do.'

No doubt the songs I sang were poor, but my listeners were pleased to consider them otherwise; and had it not been that their father wished to play whist, I fear they would have kept me at the piano all night.

There are some people who always take this game very much *au sérieux*, but we young folks managed to get a good deal of fun out of it. Then the colonel proposed that I should have a game of *écarté* with him. In playing cards with the father of a lovely girl it generally pays in the long-run to lose, and I took very good care not to win; consequently the old officer, though no money-lover, rose from the table about midnight in high good humour, greatly pleased at his good fortune and sagacity.

'You had very bad luck, my boy,' he exclaimed as he pocketed the money; 'but you must come again and have your revenge,' which I willingly promised to do if I got the chance.

It was something to get into La Maisonnette, but quite another thing to get out. It had been my idea to leave that evening, as I felt myself much stronger; but my host maintained that it would be quite as dangerous to leave then as in the morning, for our men in the darkness would probably fire on me if they heard footsteps, whereas in the morning I could climb on to the wall at the bottom of the garden which faced our advanced posts, and signal to them ere I let myself down. The Germans in front of the villa would know nothing of this, and I should only have to run the gauntlet of their posts near the Pont de Sévres, and from that point they would not see me till I had gone some way, and they were too far off to make very good practice at a running target. So I consented to stay till the next day.

In the morning the whole family seemed unaccountably serious. The laughter had departed from the girls' bright eyes, and I perceived shadows on the face of the colonel. I rallied Marie on her gravity.

'We are all so sorry to lose you,' she replied.

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'Oh, I am sure of that,' I said, with a dry laugh. 'If, mademoiselle, I can only get into Paris I will order some pocket-handkerchiefs for you.'

But the colonel stopped this badinage, and turning to me, he said seriously, 'Aymard, for a day or two you will not be fit for duty. Now, I have got a commission for you. I want you to take this letter to your colonel. He will then, I am sure, give you leave to go into Paris, where I wish you to take a note to General Schmitz, chief of the staff of my friend Trochu. You will receive a communication from Schmitz, which I wish you to take to a Monsieur Jacques Lortier; and my daughter will also give you a letter to him. The nights are dark now, and I am sure you will not mind the risk of coming to let us know how you have succeeded. You will knock three times very quickly, and we will open the door at once.'

I was highly pleased at receiving these commissions, as it would give me the opportunity of seeing Lola again—for needless to state her radiant beauty had quite won my heart—and afforded me the chance of repaying in a small way the debt I owed the family for, probably, saving my life.

'And, M. Aymard,' said Lola, with a certain tremor in her voice, 'I too have a letter I wish you to take to Jacques Lortier. He is, I must tell you,' she added, with a blush, 'my *fiancé*, and the son of the great Doctor Lortier. You will not find him at his father's house, but in the Rue École de Médecine, for he is still a student; he may not even be there, for I have not heard from him for two months, and in his last letter he said he would perhaps have to look after the wounded.'

Now, it would have been a very extraordinary thing if a girl so lovely and so charming in every way had not had a *fiancé*; but for all that, her words came upon me as a thunder-clap. Somehow I felt a horrible sinking within me.

'Your *fiancé*, mademoiselle!' I exclaimed, trying to hide the bitterness that I felt so keenly.

'Yes,' she replied, evading my glance; 'we were betrothed before I left school. My mother arranged it all.'

She spoke in such a calm, matter-of-fact tone, as if the whole affair was a mere matter of business, that I regarded her with astonishment; for I had seen enough of her to know that she was naturally a girl with a warm heart and a trusting disposition. I had remarked how, in spite of her natural gaiety, a look of care and anxiety had often flitted across her noble face when she thought she was unobserved; but I had put this down to the peculiar circumstances in which she was placed. I felt now there was perhaps another key to the enigma.

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'Yes,' said her father, and there was a gleam in his eyes as he spoke, from which I must admit I derived a good deal of comfort, 'and you can tell Lortier that I should very much like to see him. The'—but a warning glance from Lola made the irate old officer desist. Taking up his crutches, he went and dashed off a note; and the expression on his face as he did so caused me to think that the recipient of it would not derive much pleasure from the contents.

It was about ten o'clock when we all went to the end of the long garden, and after thanking the old officer and his daughters again and again for their kindness, I placed a ladder against the wall. I ascended it cautiously and waved a handkerchief. My signal was soon answered.

'Oh, M. Aymard,' cried Marie as I was about to let myself down, 'if you think of it, do get some fishing-tackle. The weather may break, and I am so tired of rice and potatoes.'

'All right, mademoiselle,' I answered, with a laugh, and the next moment I alighted on the ground. I had got half-way ere I was perceived by the Prussians; but the distance was too far for their needle-guns, and all their bullets went astray.

I was warmly welcomed by my comrades. I hardly knew till then how many friends I had. I had been reported among the killed or missing, and Grenier had taken my duties as corporal; but I found Mordon's place had not been filled up, and, to my great satisfaction, it was given to me. Since I had rescued my captain at L'Hay he had been more like a brother to me than an officer. I took the earliest opportunity to tell him everything that had occurred. He told me if I liked he would give me an order to go into hospital; but, though still rather weak, I did not wish to do that, so he took me to the colonel, to whom I presented Colonel Courtois's letter, and he at once gave me permission to go into Paris.

'The old fellow likes you,' said Lebedoyère as we left. 'When I reported that you were missing he regretted it, as he said he had seen for himself that you were well in the front the other day. But, I say,' he continued, 'you are in luck's way, it seems to me, in making the acquaintance of Colonel Courtois, for mademoiselle is a girl in a thousand. From what you have told me, I know I should have no scruple in making love to her, for that medical student must be an arrant coward never to have even tried to see her.'

'Well, *mon capitaine*,' I replied, 'I shall soon have the chance of judging his character;' and hurrying off, I quickly found myself within the fortifications. I had not forgotten poor Lefebvre's dying wishes, and I made it my first duty to send his letter to his mother and *fiancée*. Then I went down to the Tuileries, where General

Trochu had his headquarters. There, with many others, I had to wait a long time. I did not see General Schmitz, but an aide-de-camp brought me a sealed letter for the colonel, and also an open one.

'General Schmitz,' he said, 'wishes me to say that he cannot make out the name of the person for whom Colonel Courtois desires the pass, so it is left blank, and the officer in command at the *avant postes* must sign it.'

Hastening off, I went to the address given me in the Rue École de Médecine, when, to my disgust, I found that Lortier was not there, as he was looking after the wounded at the Théâtre Française, which is not a stone's-throw from the Tuileries. Passing through the grand *foyer*, which was filled with poor wretches lying on mattresses placed on the ground, I found Lortier, after many inquiries, in a small room, with several other doctors and nurses, who were apparently off duty.

'M. Lortier,' said the nurse who had acted as my guide, 'here is some one who wishes to speak with you.'

The object of my search seemed anything but pleased at being disturbed, for he was lolling in a chair, laughing and joking with a remarkably pretty girl, whose nurse's costume did not altogether hide the *soubrette*. Lortier was a slightly built but uncommonly handsome fellow about thirty, with a light-brown beard cut *à la cuirassier*, and a carefully trimmed moustache brushed upwards. That he should still have been a student showed that either he must have been very stupid or that he had wasted his time considerably. In a word, he gave me the idea of being one of the most finicking dandies I had ever come across.

'We don't attend to people here, my good fellow,' he remarked rather brusquely as he glanced at the bandages on my forehead.

'I have not come about that,' I answered. 'I have brought you letters from Colonel and Mademoiselle Courtois, and also a *passe* from General Schmitz.'

'The dickens you have!' he exclaimed, springing up and changing his manner at once. 'Adieu! my *petite chatte*,' he said, chucking the girl under the chin. 'Now come this way, monsieur,' and he took me into what appeared, from the hares'-foot brushes and rouge lying about, to be a dressing-room.

'And how is mademoiselle, and how does her fire-eating old father find himself?' he asked. 'He's a sly old dog, that colonel. He's as rich as Cæsar, only he won't admit it. My mother and his wife, I must tell you, were schoolfellows, and all the world knows that she had no need of money. I know that for a fact, and that is how it is that I and the old fellow don't get on.'

I was very much surprised that Lortier did not open his letters at once; but he seemed in

no hurry, and as I was interested in him I was glad that he did not do so, as his conversation gave me more opportunity of observing his character, though I had seen enough already to judge of that pretty accurately.

'I say,' he asked, 'what's your name? I see you are a corporal.'

'Jean Aymard,' I answered; 'but I am a sergeant now.'

'Are you a son of the famous Maître Aymard?'

'No; that is my uncle. My father is a notary, and my family live in the Boulevard Malesherbes.'

'Really. I know a pretty little *locataire* in that quarter. My father has gone to Brussels, and I am—well, to tell you the truth, nearly *tout à fait sec*.'

I saw the drift of his conversation, and accordingly told him I had no time to spare; and besides, I was thoroughly disgusted with him. How any man could be so base as to trifle with the affection of such a noble, such a lovely girl as Mademoiselle Courtois was past my comprehension. Taking my hint, he opened the letter of his *fiancée*.

'Ah!' he said jauntily when he had finished perusing it, 'you must tell her to keep up her spirits. Tell her I am quite well. The food is not as good as I should like, and it is difficult to get decent tobacco;' and then he went on for some time complaining of his trivial misfortunes.

I was so tickled by his inordinate selfishness that I had to turn away to hide my amusement.

'Those infernal Germans,' he continued, 'won't stay here much longer, I hope; so tell mademoiselle she must have patience. Between you and me, I think it is a mistake to marry so early, even if one could afford to do so. Besides, my father has been rather restive of late, and he told me the last time I saw him he would not give me any more money till I passed my examination. Lola knows all this; but I wish that you would impress upon her how awkwardly I am placed.' Then he sat down and wrote his *fiancée* a short note, and gave it to me.

'Does the colonel's letter require an answer,' I asked, 'as I must be off?'

'Ah! I had forgotten that,' he replied.

I watched him intently as he read the epistle, for I guessed to a certain extent its contents, and I wondered how he would take it.

'Well,' he exclaimed, looking up to heaven as one who has been deeply wronged—'well, this is perfectly monstrous! Listen to this,' he added, turning to me: "'If you do not think my daughter worth the risk of coming to see her, you are not worthy of her; and if you do not come you may consider your engagement at an end.'" Now, did you ever hear of such a thing? Why, I did go down to Boulogne about a month

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ago, and the men told me it was certain death if I went to the villa.'

'It is not dangerous on a dark night,' I said, 'or, for the matter of that, on a very foggy, dark day.'

'Yes, and walk into the river. No, my friend, I am not going to risk that for all the girls in Christendom. Besides,' he continued, 'it's no affair of her father's. You tell the old dragon that I will not give Lola up till I see in her own handwriting that she wishes to break off our engagement; and as for that *passé* of old Schmitz's, you can keep it; I am sure I am not going to use it.'

It was getting dark now, and Lortier proposed that I should go out and dine with him; but this I could not do.

'Well, have a glass of something to drink. We have got some very fine cognac here. A rich old lady has sent it for the wounded. Very good—isn't it?' he said as he poured out a glass for me and one for himself, and sipped it with the air of a connoisseur. 'She must be a good, simple old woman,' he continued; 'it reminds me of the way we used to eat up the pheasants that the Empress sent from Rambouillet for the hospital. We nearly got into trouble about it once, though, for it happened'—I had no time to listen to that story, and hurried off.

It was about eight o'clock when I got back, and after showing the *passé* from the chief of the staff, I was permitted by the officer in command—for my own company was not on duty in the trenches that night—to go on my errand. It was perfectly dark, and I made my way quite calmly to the colonel's door, which was immediately opened by Lola on my knocking sharply as we arranged. They were naturally surprised to see me so soon; and after giving up the letters, I threw on the table, much to Marie's delight, the fishing-tackle and a bundle of newspapers which I knew would interest the colonel.

I gave the old officer M. Lortier's message. As I suspected, it rendered him perfectly furious, and his moustache quivered with anger.

'The cowardly scoundrel!' he exclaimed. 'You hear what he says, Lola? Didn't I say he would shirk coming? Now, my girl, just give our friend the letter you have got ready.'

'Very well, father,' she replied rather sadly. 'I suppose it is all for the best. I cannot say that I really ever loved him; but then they say love often comes after marriage.'

'It is difficult to believe, mademoiselle,' I ventured to say; 'but where you are concerned it must also come before.'

She looked up at me with her frank blue eyes, and placed the letter in my hands, but said nothing.

'I trust we may often see you again, Aymard, for we are all deeply indebted to you,' remarked [1900.]

the old officer. 'You keep the envelope franked by General Schmitz; and with that *passé*, which you can get your captain to fill up, there will probably be no difficulty in coming to see us as often as you can.'

I heard his words with a strange feeling of delight. I took his invitation as a good omen, inasmuch as I felt there was at least a chance now of my filling the place of Lola's late *fiancé*, though perhaps it was rather early for me to speculate on that. The poor girl was at first certainly rather quiet; but gradually, as we laughed and talked, and I told them all the news I had been able to pick up, the sadness by degrees wore off, and I flattered myself that perhaps after a while she might see in the distant future a glimpse of that paradise which I, with my sanguine temperament, already pictured, with her as the central figure. The others, too, caught my high spirits; and, as I left them with many a promise to return when I could, few would have thought from our merry chatter that the dreaded Germans were only just across the river, and that a stray shell might at any moment shatter the little house and scatter all our hopes and plans.

I returned to duty next day, and as I watched La Maisonette through the loopholed walls, what *châteaux en Espagne* did I not build!

As I gazed upon the dark, bleak, purple woods opposite, which now resounded with the hoggish grunts of the German invaders, I thought of the bright spring-time that must come. I hoped, if I were spared, that when the blackbirds were singing their first love-songs, and the bluebells were out, and the beeches had put on their green verdure, that I might be able to wander with the two girls under their welcome shade; and I thought of how the squirrels, their solitude disturbed, would spring from branch to branch as they heard our merry laughter, and the memories of the terrible winter would fade away like some horrible dream. But I had little time to indulge in these soft reveries, for the stern duties of the present kept me too busily employed.

It might, in the ordinary course, have been some time ere I should have had the chance of going inside the fortification again had it not been that my captain had an intrigue with some fair friend who lived in the Rue Lafayette. It happened on the last day of the year that he sent me off hurriedly in the afternoon with a note for her, so I took the opportunity, with his permission, to go down to the Théâtre Comédie Française, and give Lola's note to her late *fiancé*. I found Lortier, as before, amusing himself with the society of some of the nurses. It may have been the approach of the *jour de l'an*, but anyway he seemed in the highest spirits.

'How do you find yourself, my good fellow? Glad to see you have got rid of your bandages,'

he exclaimed in his light, ethereal manner as he grasped my hand. 'I am indeed delighted to see you. Brought me good news—eh? Come this way,' he continued without waiting for an answer. 'How are they getting on up at the front? Awfully cold, I should think. I would rather be here than there, though we don't find it all Cliquot and truffles, I can tell you. *Ma foi!* you have no idea of the amount of work we have to do; time is never your own in this place. The wounded never give us any rest. All night long we have to look after them. Some want to see a priest; some cry out for their wives or mothers; some grumble. But, I say, you have brought me a *billet doux*—eh?'

I gave him Lola's letter and a packet of trinkets she had given me. The sight of the latter sobered him a little for the moment.

'Well,' he exclaimed, with a shrug of the shoulders, as he finished reading the note—'well, this finishes our little affair. She is a foolish girl, though,' he continued in a thoughtful voice; 'she might have waited. I am sorry for her. She won't do better, and my mother will be quite upset. It does not make much difference to me. I can wait, and when I get old I shall marry some tender young chicken or some pretty widow with plenty of money.'

'Have you any message?' I asked.

'Well, sergeant,' he replied, with more bitterness than his previous words would have led me to expect, 'I should just like you to tell her old fool of a father that I always thought he had a tile loose, and now I am sure of it.'

'I would rather you tell him that yourself,' I answered dryly, and saluting him, went off.

On returning I got my captain to sign the *passé* of General Schmitz. Thus armed, I had no difficulty in going beyond our lines, and got to La Maisonette about seven, when I told Colonel Courtois all that had taken place, with the exception of Lortier's last message.

'I say, M. Aymard,' said Marie, 'we want you to help us. We are running short of wood. We have, alas! been compelled even to cut down the fruit-trees, and there is nothing left now but the summer-house. An uncle built it to amuse himself; and as it is constructed of oak, and he built it so strongly, we cannot cut it down, for we have only a little saw and a chopper we use in the kitchen. It is out of the question for father to help us, and Lola and I cannot do anything.'

I readily agreed to this. Taking a lantern, the two girls and I sallied out. *Ma foi!* what fun we had as we worked away in the dark! I think the Prussian posts over the water must have heard our laughter. There was, too, a certain irony in our gaiety, for ever and anon through the darkness we heard a heavy boom from a fort, and saw a shell, like some fiendish meteor, flash across the sky. Then, but for our badinage, all was grim and silent again. As

I had to return soon, I had to relinquish the work before we had finished it; but I promised to complete the task as soon as I could.

CHAPTER III.



HENEVER my duty permitted me, with the tacit permission of my captain, I now went as often as I could to La Maisonette; but unfortunately the moon was now getting fuller every day (as any one can see who consults an almanac of that date), so that, on account of the great danger, I had to time my visits accordingly. There was comparatively little risk in returning, as I could get over the wall; the danger was in going up the road, which was immediately in front of the German outposts, and waiting till the door was opened. So that it happened that I sometimes started in the twilight just after the sun had set, and only stayed a few minutes, so as to return before the moon had well risen.

'Well, those girls must be pretty,' remarked Grenier one evening about five o'clock, as I was going to start. 'I am afraid, my boy, you will play this game once too often.'

'But I am going to see the colonel on business,' I answered.

'Of course, we all know that,' he replied slyly. 'Apart from the risk, there are plenty of us who would not mind some of that same sort of business.'

I was specially anxious to go on this particular evening. One of my reasons may perhaps indicate a small mind: that very morning, the 12th of January, before the whole battalion, I and three others had had conferred upon us the *Medaille Militaire*—I had received it for rescuing Captain Lebedoyère—and I was vastly pleased at the distinction, and knew that my friends would think more highly of me for having obtained it. Besides, I had not seen them for nearly a week. When I had accidentally mentioned, the last time I saw them, that my fête-day was on the 8th, the girls had said they would give me a present, and naturally I wished to receive it. Colonel Courtois had begged me not to come—and Lola and Marie sided with him—till the moon had run its course; but love is strong, and I had pleaded so earnestly that he had allowed me to come once more. I told him my visit would probably be on the 12th.

Just as I entered the door a bullet from the other side of the river whizzed past my ear; but I had no time to comment upon this. To my surprise, I found the two girls in terrible trouble, and was very glad that I had not listened to Grenier's expostulations. They

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evidently expected me, for I found the door ajar.

'Oh, M. Aymard,' exclaimed Lola as I breathlessly entered, 'father has had a fit! Whatever shall we do? He has had them before, and we always keep by us a particular medicine which the doctor told us to give him; but we have no more of it now; and if'—her voice quivered as she spoke, and I saw by the little lamp the tears welling into those lovely eyes that had so often made my pulse beat faster—'and if we cannot get some more medicine, we are afraid from what the doctor told us he may go off at any moment.'

At this point, plucky and brave as she was, the noble girl quite broke down, and poor little Marie joined in with her sobs. Taking me by the hand, Lola led me to the sofa, on which I saw the old officer lying in a comatose state. His face was of an ashy whiteness, and my first impression was that he was dead; but after listening intently and placing a glass over his mouth, I was relieved to find that he still breathed.

'My poor lass,' I said to Lola in my distress, quite forgetting the conventionalities, 'have you got the prescription?'

'No,' she replied; 'we cannot find it. But here is the empty bottle; it has the reference number and the chemist's address on it, so the preparation can be made up from that. See, there is the date and everything.'

Unfortunately this pharmacy was in the Rue de Bac, on the *rive gauche*, and it would be an impossibility for me to go as far, even if I started at once, as I had to go round with the guard at eight that evening; and the colonel had entrusted me with a very important commission, to get food in the morning from the central stores for the battalion. On previous occasions there had been a great deal of robbery in spite of all the vigilance of the officers, and I felt proud of the confidence reposed in me, and determined that nothing should go wrong on this occasion if I could help it. Under these circumstances I foresaw the awkwardness of my position, and how perfectly helpless I was. Love pulled me one way and duty another. I explained all this as quickly as I could. 'Mademoiselle,' I said, 'rely on me. I have a comrade I can trust; he has a good heart. I will make it worth his while, too. I will start at once, and to-morrow at seven, without fail, I will come.'

'But to-morrow at seven,' replied Lola, 'the moon will be up, and with all this snow on the ground it will be as bright as day.'

'Don't you trouble yourself about that,' I returned.

For a moment she stood in deep thought. 'I will tell you what is best,' she said. 'Do not leave the lines till you see me. At seven precisely I will stand outside the door. You will, as usual, make for the wall at the bottom of the
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garden; then, as you turn the corner up the road, I shall be between you and the Prussians, and they will be afraid to fire at you, if you keep close to the wall, for fear of hitting me; but even then I do not like your risking your life in this way.'

'What is my life?'—I had almost said 'my darling,' but restrained myself—'against the pleasure of helping you in your distress?' I answered softly.

She glanced up for a moment into my face with her tear-dimmed eyes. 'I am grateful,' she said; 'we are both grateful—are we not, Marie? We only hope that you will come to no harm, so that we may have the opportunity of proving our gratitude.'

'Have no fear for me, mademoiselle,' I said as we went down the garden; 'keep up your spirits, and I shall hope to find your good father much better to-morrow.' I spoke as cheerfully as I could; but the words stuck in my throat, for, to tell the truth, I hardly expected to find the old officer alive the next day.

We had reached the wall, and I was about to mount the ladder, when Marie hurriedly begged me to wait. 'Stay, M. Aymard; we have forgotten to give you our little present. I will be back in a moment,' and without another word she ran back to the house, leaving her sister and myself alone. It would not have been fair, under the sad and peculiar circumstances in which she was placed, for me to have told the beautiful girl then and there how much I loved her; but as the pale moon shone on her lovely face, it was as much as I could do to restrain my feelings. I felt certain, too, that she reciprocated my love. I was buttoning my coat when her eye caught sight of the bright medal I had received that morning.

'Why, what is that?' she asked. 'You have been decorated? Well, I am pleased,' she said when I had given her particulars, 'because you have been so anxious to possess a medal.'

'Yes,' I answered, 'I was indeed surprised and delighted to receive it. There is only one thing in the whole world that I would rather gain'—In spite of all my resolutions I would have probably told her what that was, but just then Marie came racing down towards us, and I had only time to whisper, as I looked down into the depths of her blue eyes, 'You know what that is, mademoiselle.'

'Here it is, Monsieur Aymard!' exclaimed the young girl breathlessly. 'Lola and I have made you this comforter. When you are watching over us in the trenches you must wear it. You see it is all manner of colours, for we had not much wool.' Then she added with a smile, 'I have some good news to tell you, and that is that father seems to have come round. He is really better.'

'I am glad to hear that,' I replied; 'and as for your present, I shall certainly always value it for

the sake of those who made it. But, alas! I must be off now. It is understood, then, *mademoiselle*,' I continued, turning to Lola, 'that I shall see you to-morrow at seven.' I don't know what possessed me—I suppose I was carried away by the beauty of the girl—I could not help adding, 'If—if I succeed to-morrow'—but here my courage failed me.

'And what then?' she asked, extending her hand to bid me adieu.

'Well, if I succeed—if I succeed,' I blurted out, 'will you give me a kiss—one, only just one—to-morrow?'

'*Ma foi!*' interposed her sister, with a laugh, 'she ought to give you a dozen—as many as you like then. *Parbleu!* I would.'

I saw Lola blush, and I feared that I had taken undue advantage of her. 'Am I asking too much, *mademoiselle*? I pleaded earnestly. 'If so, forget my words as though they had never been spoken.'

'No, no,' she answered nervously, and then without replying directly to my question, with a bright and almost roguish smile on her face that drove away all doubt within me, she added, 'To-morrow, then, at seven.'

With these words ringing in my ears, I reached our lines in safety. The *état-major* of our battalion was quartered in the beautiful villa of the Rothschilds; but the company on duty used as a guard-room a charming little house nearer the river, formerly the residence of a well-known actress. When I had gone with my captain round with the guard and posted the men, I asked him if I could speak with him for a moment.

'Well, sergeant, what is it?' he said as he threw himself on what had once been a beautifully embroidered sofa. Then I told him everything that had taken place at La Maisonette, and my proposed task on the following evening.

'It is certainly rather risky,' he remarked as I concluded; 'in fact, it is perfect madness to go at that time. Why not slip out at about four in the morning, when it is dark, and wake them up and tell them you cannot come till later? Besides, there's not so much need for the medicine, as you say the colonel is better.'

I could not bring myself to take his advice. I thought of the two girls all alone and defenceless in their trouble, and pictured the scorn on Lola's face—a scorn that I felt I would justly merit if I failed to keep my word when she had promised me such a reward; for I reckoned with all a lover's impetuosity that if I but gained her kiss she was as good as mine. I became intoxicated, as it were, at the very thought of my good fortune. All danger was forgotten; and as I went out into the night to see that my half-frozen men were on the alert at their respective posts, I seemed to tread on air.

Ah! what dreams came floating through my brain! The bitter wind to me had lost its

keenness, and as the moon shone out in all its splendour my spirits rose, for every moment brought me nearer to the girl I loved; and those long hours of dreary watching that formerly I had so hated seemed nothing to me now. All the misery, all the sadness, that like some dark cloud had hung over us for three long months, seemed suddenly to have passed away. As I gazed through the crenellated wall across the snow, and saw the little house where Lola was, and thought of her sweet face and the indefinable charm of her manner, I wondered whether she too was thinking of me. Gradually the moon sank in the west, and by degrees the landscape darkened; and but for a '*Qui vive?*' now and again, silence and gloom reigned everywhere, except to the south, where the methodical booming never ceased day or night, for the Prussians had got their heavy siege-guns up at last, and since the 5th of January, with thirty batteries (one hundred and eighty guns), they had, from the heights of Meudon, Clamart, and Chatillon, opened fire on the forts of Issy, Vauves, and Montrouge, which are situated between these heights and the *enceinte*.

At last the *diane* sounded, and those who were in the guard-room made their morning *café*. Then as the sun was just about to rise the *picquet* came to relieve us.

As I marched down the Avenue de la Grande Armée on the following afternoon alongside a heavily-laden *fourgon*, I noted with pleasure that the weather seemed getting milder, and that snow or even rain was coming. On arriving at our quarters I learnt that my comrade had been able to get the medicine, and as I pressed a louis into his hand I felt I had hardly rewarded him sufficiently. As the time approached Lebedoyère came up and begged me to give up my enterprise, but without success. The moon, it is true, was rising fast, and it was almost as light as day; but dark masses of clouds were looming in the north, and as they scurried across the wild wintry sky they obliterated the moonlight every now and then; and as I watched anxiously I thought how, had I been a heathen, I should have prayed to Diana that she, the 'dark-haired goddess of the night,' would, if only for a few moments, consent to hide her pallid beauty.

'It only wants two minutes now,' said my captain, who was looking towards the house through his field-glasses. 'There she is!' he exclaimed a moment later; and sure enough, standing out clearly against the snow, I saw Lola waiting for me.

'Adieu, *mon capitaine!*' I said.

'Adieu, Aymard!' he answered as he wrung my hand.

It seemed indeed as if Diana did intend to favour my undertaking, for at that moment a
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heavy cloud hid her completely ; but unfortunately the semi-darkness lasted but for a moment, and I had not got half-way to the wall of the colonel's garden when I was observed by the German outposts near the Pont de Sèvres. Their bullets did me no harm ; but the firing undoubtedly put their comrades opposite La Maissonette on the alert, if their vigilance was not already excited by seeing the colonel's daughter standing in the road.

On reaching the wall, as I waited a moment to get my breath, the thought suddenly flashed upon me : what a fool I was, not only then, but on previous occasions, not to have brought a rope with me, which might have been fixed firmly on the other side, and which the girls could have thrown over to me when they heard my voice ! But it was too late now ; so, turning the corner sharply, I raced towards Lola.

'I've got the medicine,' I cried softly as I approached her. 'I have kept my promise.'

'And I will keep mine,' she exclaimed, with a bright love-light in her eyes, and as she spoke retreated just within the threshold.

In that blissful moment I forgot everything but her presence, and in my eagerness I stood unfortunately for one second on the step, in a direct line with the mirror of which I have spoken. My arms were round Lola's neck, and hers round mine, and our lips had met, when—three sharp reports rang out across the river. One bullet passed through her fair white arm, which was the only part of her exposed, and with a piercing cry she fell backward, whilst I staggered forward into the room, with a bullet in the hip and another in the ankle. I was crippled for life, but I won my kiss, and I won Lola.

A COMMON GRAVE IN SOUTH AFRICA.

No ponderous tomb, no fretted vaults are there.
Rude crosses mark the spot, and witness bear
To where the unnamed dead in slumber lie,
Beneath the charged cloud or golden sky.

No stately yew shall rear a canopy ;
But mossy rock and boulders rude shall be
Their angel-guarded, nature-hallowed shrine,
And heaven's sweet dew their sacramental wine.

Above, a temple never built with hands—
The starlight, and the sapphire heaven—with spans
E'en loftier far than abbey-shadowed aisle
Or columned splendour of cathedral pile.

The veldt-scrub is their only chancel rail,
The sun-baked sod their kneeling-cushion pale.

No full-voiced choir is there in cloister dim,
No priestly note, no stirring swell of hymn.

The ponderous crash of organ's labouring roll
Has brought no solace to their passing soul ;
Yet Nature's clarion call and antiphon
Peals ever round their grave in unison.

The climbing vines their fragrant censers swing,
O'er all the hallowed air the wild-flowers fling
Their breathing incense to the heavenly dome,
Pointing the way to man's eternal home.

From comrade's side, from battle's bloody fame,
God in His mercy called them home again.
He called His own who fell in glorious strife,
And wrote their names within His book of life.

VIOLET TWEEDALE



THE KING'S TINTORETTO.

By ADAM R. THOMSON.

I.



IN one of the private apartments of the Royal Palace at Mannstadt, the King of Terrania sat at breakfast with his only sister, the Princess Margaret. He had just finished reading a letter, which, with an involuntary glance at his companion, he now laid on

the table in front of him. Then he pushed away his plate, and declared peevishly that he could eat no more.

'What is the matter, Charles?' inquired the Princess, in a voice in which anxiety was not unmingled with firmness.

'Matter!' he echoed angrily, as a flush mounted to his boyish face—he was not yet twenty-four. 'You are the matter—you, Margaret!'

'I thought so,' replied the girl. 'That letter, I suppose, is from the Baron von Hasenheim?'

He nodded assent. 'You can read it if you like,' he said.

'You are very kind, but I won't trouble. I dare say I can guess its contents. It is not the first communication you have had from the Baron since he has been in Russia, and I presume it does not materially differ from its predecessors. The Chancellor of Terrania is no doubt an excellent statesman, but his strong point is certainly not originality.'

'No,' said the King, 'it is not. Hasenheim abhors everything of a dangerous or revolutionary tendency, and—and perhaps it would be as well if others in high places were as sound in their ideas as he is. He hasn't been in England, doesn't ride a bicycle, or even cultivate the mixed society of the students who use our National Picture Gallery.'

'Thank you so much,' rejoined the Princess, as, with a light laugh, she rose from her chair, curtseyed, and sat down again.

'I mean what I say,' exclaimed King Charles; 'there's nothing to joke about. To do so at a crisis like this is to imitate Nero, who, you will remember, fiddled while'—

'My dear Charles,' interrupted his sister, 'pray don't let your admiration for the Baron carry you too far. Even the unoriginal are not necessarily trite. But there,' she added quickly, 'you needn't get angry; I won't be frivolous any more. See, I am now quite serious.'

She smoothed back a stray curl from her low, broad forehead, tightly compressed her lips, and

assumed an expression of extreme severity, which sat strangely on her pretty, mobile face.

For a few moments her brother silently drummed on the table with his fingers; then he said slowly:

'Of course I know you're ever so much cleverer than I am, Margaret; but then, after all, I'm the king, and you, as my sister, ought to—to—in short, to consider the responsibilities of my—of our position.'

'In other words, I ought to agree to marry Prince Porodski?'

'Just so.'

'It is the one thing I cannot and will not do.'

'But you must; indeed you must. Our very existence as an independent state will be imperilled if we do not at once obtain a loan of three hundred thousand marks. Well, France will lend us the money only on condition that we form a closer alliance with Russia. To do this, as Hasenheim has now ascertained, your marriage to the Prince is essential.'

'I detest the man. He is elderly, stout, and deadly dull. The week he spent here was the most miserable week of my life. It is wicked of you to ask me to marry him.'

'You are unreasonable, Margaret, and—and prejudiced. Porodski may have the disadvantages you mention, but you must admit that his wealth and influence are enormous. In becoming his wife you would be stepping into a position second to that of scarcely any woman in Europe.'

'Ah, and what then?'

'Why, then you—you might make history.'

'The prospect does not attract me. Its risks to one of my sex are too many and obvious.'

'Or you might patronise the arts and sciences, and start a *salon*'—

'At which my principal duty would be to apologise for my husband's absence. No, thank you, Charles; I don't seek distinction in that way either.'

'You surprise me; I thought art was the passion of your life. You have often told me that your happiest hours are those you spend painting.'

The girl blushed ever so slightly. 'To love good art,' she replied, 'is one thing, to patronise indifferent artists quite another.'

'Well, Margaret, it comes to this. Rather than make a marriage of exceptional brilliancy, you are prepared to see me disgraced and Terrania plunged in the horrors of a revolution; for, with agriculture in its present depressed

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condition, these results must inevitably follow any attempt to raise the money we require by further taxation.'

There was a brief pause; then the Princess asked suddenly:

'If one of us must marry, why should it not be you, Charles?'

'State reasons stand in the way. The only suitable Princess is unavailable at present; she is barely fourteen, in fact.' He gave a laugh, not entirely free from bitterness.

'Then, could not a loan be obtained from some Power that would not make any conditions?'

'Such a Power does not exist.'

'No'—slowly—'I dare say not. Still, you might find one whose terms it would be possible to satisfy.'

'To borrow from any other country than France would be against our interests, and'—

'To borrow from France against my interests.'

The King's hands twitched impatiently. 'Then you are determined to defy us?' he exclaimed.

'I have no option.'

'Very well; the Baron shall be informed of your decision without delay. I have no doubt he will find a way to bring you to your senses.'

He rose to leave the room, but she called him back, and with a deprecatory gesture he resumed his seat. 'What is the use of continuing the discussion?' he murmured sullenly.

'I want to ask you a question,' she replied. 'Supposing by some means or other I could obtain the money you want, would you use your influence with Hasenheim to drop—at all events for the present—the question of my marriage to Prince Porodski?'

The King looked doubtful. Deep down in his heart he loved and admired his sister; but, on the other hand, he was terribly afraid of interfering with the plans of the aged statesman who had practically guided the destinies of Terrania during the whole of his three years' reign, and for the two previous decades.

'Three hundred thousand marks is a large sum,' he observed at last. 'I cannot imagine how you could get it.'

'I don't know that I can, but may I try?'

'I—I suppose so; but, of course, you must tell me what you propose to do.'

'So I will. It is only right. I'm going to the National Gallery now to spend the morning finishing the copy I've been making of Tintoretto's "Dream." While I work I can be concreting my ideas, and when we meet at lunch I'll tell you everything. Meanwhile, you won't write to Baron von Hasenheim—will you, dear?'

'No; though you must understand that I don't in any way pledge myself to—to'—

'Certainly not, Charles,' she cried, with a laugh. 'I quite understand—quite.' Then, before he could reply, she ran from the room.

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II.



ATE in the evening of the day on which the interview recorded above took place, Sir George Mullworthy, the British ambassador to Terrania, was enjoying a post-prandial cigar in his own particular sanctum at the Embassy, when the sudden entrance of a tall, fair-haired man caused him to drop the English newspaper he had been reading, and to rise hurriedly from his easy-chair with the cry of, 'Elstree, by all that's wonderful!'

'Just so,' replied his visitor as they shook hands. 'Elstree, and none other. I wouldn't let your man announce me; wanted to surprise you, don't you know? Glad to see you looking so well, old fellow.'

'Oh, I'm right enough, thanks, though a little lonely just now. Lady Mullworthy is in England, and I can't get away to join her for another fortnight. But what on earth brings you to this dismal hole, Elstree? I thought you always spent the beginning of July at Henley.'

'I do as a rule; but, well—at present Mannstadt has superior attractions for me. I've been here for several days, in fact.'

'H'm. Why didn't you come to see me before?'

'Oh, I've been travelling incog., under the name of Harold Grant, and I didn't want to risk my real identity becoming known. I'm not sure that I should have ventured to visit you now had I not needed your assistance.'

'Well, sit down, take a cigar, have a drink, and tell me what I can do for you.'

Lord Elstree availed himself of Mullworthy's proffered hospitality, and then, as he blew a cloud of smoke into the air, remarked gravely:

'I have recently been developing a taste for art, Sir George.'

'Great heavens!'

'Precisely. It is true, nevertheless. Every morning this week you might have seen me, dressed in the garb of the conventional student, spending hours in the Terranian National Gallery in front of that masterpiece, Tintoretto's "Dream."'

'And you didn't find it slow?'

'I should just think not.'

'Then all I can say is you have undergone a remarkable change in the two years that have passed since we last met, Elstree.'

'Oh, I have indeed.'

'Though, of course, I knew your father was a connoisseur in pictures, as witness the collection at your place in Kent.'

'Yes, yes,' laughed Elstree. 'After all, belated manifestations of the hereditary principle are not unheard of. However, to come to the point, although I've passed so much time in

front of the Tintoretto, I've been engaged in a much more entertaining occupation than mere contemplation. I've been renewing a delightful acquaintanceship I formed last winter with a young lady who—much against the wishes of her friends, I understand—was finishing her education at Girona. In a word, Princess Margaret of Terrania has promised to be my wife.'

Sir George Mullworthy took his cigar from his mouth, and gazed at his friend in blank amazement.

'But'—he ejaculated at last.

'Of course, Mullworthy, there's a "but." It's to remove it I require your help.'

'My dear Elstree, I'm extremely sorry to disappoint you; we were college chums, and we've always got on well together, and so forth; but for a man in my position to mix himself up in an elopement would simply be madness.'

'I have no intention of eloping; I mean to marry the Princess openly. Why shouldn't I? I've got enough money to keep her in comfort, shall we say? and my blood is as blue as is to be found in England, outside the circle of royalty at least.'

'Yes, yes; but I happen to know that they are determined to marry her to an elderly Russian prince. The Premier, Von Hasenheim, is in Russia arranging the matter now.'

'Quite so. It was on the receipt of a letter from the Princess informing me of these facts that I hurried to Mannstadt. Terrania, it seems, is in the midst of a crisis, and they are ready to sacrifice Margaret in order to please France and Russia, with a view to obtaining a loan from the former Power.'

'Crises occur about once a fortnight in third-rate, impecunious states like this,' observed the ambassador absently. 'My policy is invariably to do nothing.'

'Still, I suppose, Great Britain does not regard this projected marriage with any special favour.'

'No; but it is no concern of hers. Though, of course, if it were possible to take a rise out of France and Russia without risks, we should not be indisposed to do so.'

'It is possible, my dear fellow.'

The ambassador smiled incredulously. 'Without risks?' he queried.

'Absolutely. Listen, and I'll tell you how. That picture we've just been speaking of, Tintoretto's "Dream," is, as you must know, the private property of the King.'

Mullworthy nodded. 'His Majesty lent it to the Gallery about two months since,' he remarked, 'at the suggestion of the Princess, who has democratic leanings, and was anxious that the public should have an opportunity of seeing a work she herself so greatly admired. Hasenheim, as I have heard, was, strangely

enough, not told till the loan was a *fait accompli*, and was consequently exceedingly annoyed.'

'No doubt,' laughed Elstree. 'However, the King is about to withdraw the picture. In fact, it is being removed from the Gallery to-night. A very good copy, which the Princess finished only this morning, is to be hung in its stead.'

'Indeed! But, my dear fellow, may I ask what all this has to do with the matter we have been discussing?'

'The King,' replied the young nobleman, leaning forward in his chair and scanning the other anxiously, 'wishes to sell his picture. He has agreed, if he can obtain the money his Government want in this way, not to press for Margaret's marriage to Prince Porodski at present.'

'Well?'

'Well, to-morrow morning you will receive a letter from the Princess offering the picture, on His Majesty's behalf, to the British Government for a sum of three hundred thousand marks.'

'To—the—British Government? Good gracious, man! we've no money to spend on pictures just now. Guns are more in our line.'

'All the same, George, by accepting the Princess's offer you will at once thwart France and Russia and—render me a service I shall never forget. As for the money, that is my affair. I will supply it. But you must allow the King to think your Government are concerned in the transaction, and that the picture is destined for the National Gallery. Further, by to-morrow night it must be on its way to England, addressed to the trustees of that institution. Come, my friend, do you consent?'

Sir George Mullworthy sat several minutes smoking before he observed slowly:

'Your proposal is simply extraordinary, Elstree, and I—I don't know what to say. May I remind you that I am entirely in the dark as to how what you suggest can in the least degree assist in bringing about a marriage between Princess Margaret and yourself? Even if the idea of marrying the Princess to Porodski were permanently abandoned, I feel positive that Von Hasenheim would never agree to accept you as His Majesty's brother-in-law.'

'That, my dear fellow, is exactly where you are wrong. I can't tell you why at present, but I can promise you full enlightenment in less than a week.'

'And you can guarantee that I shall run no risks?'

'Certainly. I have already said so.'


'Very well, then; I will do as you wish.'

Lord Elstree expressed his gratitude, and shortly afterwards left to return to his hotel. Before retiring to rest he wrote several letters, some to leading London newspapers, and one, on

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which he expended much care, to the Baron von Hasenheim at St Petersburg. To this communication he appended the partly fictitious name under which he was now travelling, reflecting as he did so that the Chancellor was hardly likely to guess that Harold Grant and Harold William Graylotte, Earl of Elstree, were one and the same person.

III.

HREE days passed away, and on the morning of the fourth King Charles and his sister were once more at breakfast together. His Majesty's demeanour had completely changed since the sale of the Tintoretto had placed him in possession of some ready money; he was now as cheerful as he had before been irritable. With Margaret he was on the best of terms; and she, on her side, had been careful, so far, not to refer to either of the two matters likely to cause him uneasiness—to wit, her own matrimonial project, and the explanation which would become necessary on the Baron's return from Russia. The King, however, himself approached the latter subject, by saying confidentially:

'I shall tell Hasenheim all about the picture directly he gets back, though it really has nothing to do with him how I dispose of my own property. However, to avoid unpleasantness, I shall tell him; and I shall at the same time offer to lend the State three hundred thousand marks, though I shall actually hand over only two hundred thousand.'

'I thought the Government wanted the whole three, Charles?'

'Ye—es, Margaret, that is so; but—well, they are a hundred thousand in arrears with my allowance, and I can't wait any longer for it. To tell you the truth, I was tempted to play for high stakes a week or two since, and I lost.'

'Oh Charles!'

'I won't play on such terms again, my dear, I assure you. The hundred thousand has more than paid what I owe, but I don't mean to risk any further losses.'

'I hope not. Suppose the people came to regard you as a gambler, Charles.'

'Well, my dear, many of them would no doubt be shocked, but the majority would merely say that, after all, they liked their ruler to be human.'

'Still, a man in your position can't afford to be too human.'

'I won't be; though really, you know, Margaret, I never credited you with being above the ordinary failings of humanity yourself.'

'I'm not, Charles; far from it.' She almost regretted that she could not seize this opportunity

of telling him of the English lover of whose existence even he was not yet aware. But Elstree had pledged her to silence, and she dared not break her word.

'I am still lost in astonishment,' said the King presently; 'first, that the British Government should want to buy pictures; and, secondly, that you should have been able to find out that fact.'

'You shall hear how I made that discovery by-and-by, my dear Charles. Meanwhile you won't forget that you have undertaken that I shall not be worried any more about Prince Porodski.'

'I won't worry you about him, and I—I'll assert my authority and prevent Hasenheim from doing so, for a time at least.'

At this moment a servant entered, and, with a low bow, handed His Majesty a telegram and retired. The King tore open the envelope, and having hastily perused the message, passed it without a word to Margaret.

It was from the Baron von Hasenheim, and ran as follows: 'Heard yesterday you had sold Tintoretto to British Government. Started for home at once. Transaction must be cancelled at all cost. Explain on arrival.'

'What does he mean? Who has told him?' gasped the King.

'The telegram was handed in at Breslau,' said the Princess meditatively; 'he'll be here in six hours.'

'But I—I cannot cancel the transaction now. I've disposed of a great part of the money.'

'Of course not. Besides, the picture is in England by this time.'

'Yes; Hasenheim is too late, whatever he means.'

'Well, Charles, you must tell him so when you see him.'

'I—I will,' said the King dubiously, rising from the table.

Margaret also rose, and making her way to her own room, wrote a short note to Harold Grant, Esquire, and directed its immediate delivery at that gentleman's hotel. It was a request that he would meet her in an hour at a certain secluded spot in the Botanical Gardens, whither she was about to proceed on her bicycle. He had particularly desired to be informed at the earliest moment of the receipt of any information as to the Chancellor's return, and she consequently determined to lose no time in imparting the disquieting intelligence that had just reached the Palace.

Elstree, however, whom she duly met at the rendezvous appointed, was by no means perturbed at her news. On the contrary, he cried delightedly:

'Splendid, my darling, splendid! The Baron's return to Mannstadt to-day is just what I expected. To-morrow you will understand why it was I suggested the sale of the picture, when

it would have been far simpler and more agreeable for me to have advanced the money you wanted. To-morrow, Margaret, I shall have obtained Hasenheim's consent to our betrothal.'

There was no one about, and they said many more things (which, however, do not concern this narrative) before they parted, she to cycle back to the Palace, he to walk at a brisk pace to the British Embassy.

He was ushered into the presence of the ambassador, who, having greeted him somewhat excitedly, placed a copy of the *Morning Post* of the previous day in his hand, and pointed to a brief paragraph in the corner of the centre page.

'Read that,' said Mullworthy, 'and tell me, if you can, who on earth has put it in.'

This is what Lord Elstree read:

'A very important addition is about to be made to the Foreign Section of the National Gallery, the Trustees having secured a characteristic though little-known example of Tintoretto's art, entitled "The Dream." The picture in question has, we believe, been purchased from His Majesty the King of Terrania.'

'Extremely interesting,' observed Elstree calmly as he put down the paper.

'Yes, yes; but who has put the paragraph in?'

'I'll tell you, my dear George; I did.'

'You?' Mullworthy half-rose in his agitation.

'Certainly. I sent it to the other papers as well, and I've no doubt they've all inserted it.'

'But I thought it was understood between us that you were to wire one of the Trustees of the National Gallery that the picture had been sent there in error, and was to be readdressed to your place in Kent.'

'Quite so.'

'And yet you—oh, confound it, Elstree! what are you driving at? I am completely mystified by your proceedings.'

The other laughed. 'To one of my ingenuous nature,' he remarked, 'to indulge in a little mystification, or may I say diplomacy?—of the old kind, of course—has all the charm of novelty.'

'But your promise that I should run no risks?'

'Oh, that'll be all right, Mullworthy. But, look here, old man, what I came to tell you was this. Hasenheim is returning home, and will be at Mannstadt in a few hours. It is a hundred to one he'll be calling upon you in the course of the afternoon with reference to the picture affair. He'll want you to forego the bargain—which, however, you mustn't do on any consideration. Say—or stop—it's a fine day; have an afternoon in the country, and don't leave word where you've gone.'

'As you will. I've no wish to interview the Baron at present, and I'm too bewildered to dissent from anything you propose.'

'Good. When the old fellow finds you are not available, his next move will probably be to call on me, and then—well, come and dine with me to-night at eight, and you shall hear everything. Meanwhile, I hope you'll enjoy your outing.' With which his lordship waved his hand gaily and took his departure.

IV.



BARON VON HASENHEIM arrived in Mannstadt in the worst of tempers, and after a very unsatisfactory interview with the King, drove to the British Embassy. The absence of the ambassador threw him into a state of mind bordering on frenzy; but after a moment's thought he grew somewhat calmer, and murmuring an address to his coachman, re-entered his carriage. A few minutes later and he was seated in the hotel sitting-room, occupied by Harold Grant.

'I have little time to spare,' said the Baron bluntly as he took a letter from his pocket, 'and I will therefore at once ask you, Mr Grant, what is the meaning of this?'

The other took the missive from him, hastily scanned it, and returned it.

'I seem to have made myself clear enough,' he said. 'The King has sold to the British Government as a genuine Tintoretto a picture which is a mere copy; that is all.'

'Ah! I admit nothing of the sort.'

'It is of little consequence what you admit, my lord. The picture has ere this arrived in London, and the Trustees of the National Gallery are not fools—they know a copy when they see one.'

'Well, we will leave that question for a moment. You say in this letter that you are the only person who can set the matter straight. What do you mean by that?'

'Merely, my lord, that I am the owner of the original.'

'You—are—the—owner—of the—original?' echoed the Baron slowly. 'You had better be careful, sir; the original was'—He stopped suddenly.

'It was sold twenty years ago by the late King of Terrania to the late Earl of Elstree.'

Hasenheim started.

'Sold when one of the frequent crises which occur here rendered his late Majesty in need of funds. It was sold on condition that it should not be publicly exhibited, and that the transaction should be kept a secret. A copy replaced it in the Palace, and none knew of the sale save

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those immediately concerned and the Baron von Hasenheim.'

'It—it is not true, sir.'

'Pardon me, Baron; certain papers found after the death of Lord Elstree give a full history of the transaction. These papers are now in my possession.'

Von Hasenheim knitted his brow, but said nothing.

'You see,' continued the other, 'the purchaser of the picture happened to be my father.'

'Oh, then you are'——

'The Earl of Elstree. That is so. But now, my lord, what do you propose to do? The present King has imprudently made no stipulation as to secrecy; the picture has been sent to the National Gallery in London; the English papers have already announced its acquisition; the Trustees of the National Gallery are hard men; and, in short, His Majesty and Terrania can only be saved from humiliation by the substitution of the original picture for the copy.'

'And you?'——

'I am prepared to part with the original on one condition.'

'Let me hear it.'

'It is very simple. I merely require you to assent to my marriage to the Princess Margaret of Terrania.'

Hasenheim sprang from his chair. 'You are a madman,' he cried.

'I cannot see it. I met the Princess in England, and we have learnt to love each other. I am one of the richest men in Europe. Why should we not marry?'

'Because—oh, for a million reasons,' answered Hasenheim, weakly subsiding into his chair.

'Well, you must take your choice; either I marry the Princess, or else'—— He broke off with an expressive gesture.

'This is infamous,' murmured the Baron.

'No, Baron,' rejoined Elstree hotly. 'The infamy would have been to have insisted, from motives of political expediency, on a young and beautiful girl marrying a worn-out *roué* whom she detested.'

The aged Chancellor sat perfectly still for several minutes, considering the situation in all its aspects. Anxious to please France and Russia, he was nevertheless afraid of offending Great Britain. Besides—and this was the great point—the depleted condition of the national exchequer was a strong reason for agreeing to Elstree's terms, extravagant as they were.

'Very well,' he said at last as he rose to go. 'If the Princess chooses to make a *mésalliance*, she shall do so.'

'Thank you, my lord,' replied Elstree. 'That is all I require. To-morrow, with your invaluable aid, I doubt not His Majesty will return a favourable answer to my suit.'

Then he escorted Hasenheim to his carriage, and the Chancellor was driven to his residence, lamenting alike the folly of his royal master and the horribly unconventional ideas of the infatuated Margaret.

Lord Elstree returned to his apartment, and when Sir George Mullworthy duly appeared at the hour of eight, he told him, in the highest of spirits, all that had occurred. Mullworthy was naturally astonished, but as the matter had ended satisfactorily he could afford to treat it lightly.

'Well, Elstree,' he said, 'I congratulate you both on the excellent cards you held, and on the superb way in which you played them. The result is in every respect magnificent, and I am delighted to have been able to assist you in bringing it about. At the same time, my dear fellow, had fate made you a diplomatist instead of a millionaire, your views as to what is and what is not risky would, I feel pretty certain, have undergone very considerable modification.'



THE SEALED PACKET.

BY THOMAS ST E. HAKE,

AUTHOR OF 'THE SHIP-BREAKERS,' 'WITHIN SOUND OF THE WEIR,' ETC.

CHAPTER I.

UNDER THE CABIN LAMP.



IT was still night when I woke in my narrow berth. I had taken passage on board the liner *La Plata*; and it was the powerful revolutions of the ship's screw, beating with its monotonous throb into my throbbing ear, that had roused me. It had brought to my recollection that I had placed something for safety under the mattress. I now raised myself upon my elbow and peered round. I was racked with fever; and it was doubtless this fever that stirred within me a sudden sense of dread. From behind the red curtain drawn closely across the opposite bunk came the sound of regular breathing; it came from my fellow-passenger. I rose with an effort, softly drew the curtain aside, and looked in upon him.

The light of the lamp swinging in the cabin-roof between our two berths fell upon the man who lay there apparently sound asleep. Of a sudden he opened his eyes upon me, and the look—though no more than the look of a dreaming man—sent an involuntary shudder through me. The fever had taken a firm hold; and now a panic-stricken thought seemed to grip my brain: what if the thing I had taken such special care to conceal had been stolen from under me while I slept? I lifted the light mattress in actual fear and trembling. No! There the thing lay safe and secure enough. It was an oblong sealed packet.

As I seated myself upon my trunk and turned the packet over in my hot hand I was now seized with a more comprehensible dread. 'What if I grow so feverish as to lose my wits,' I muttered, 'before I have mastered all that is written within?'

I placed my hand upon the seal. Then I paused, thoughtfully recalling another's words: 'When read, throw it into the swirling waters behind the great screw, where it will whirl and sink, while the secret will rest with you.'

'What secret?'

'My secret. The secret as to where diamonds valued at half-a-million pounds sterling were left, deposited by me when last in London, nearly a year ago; and the way to find them, if you keep fixed in your mind what I have written here.'

'These diamonds, Mr Pepworth—do they become your niece's under the will?'

'Yes; everything will go—will have gone—to her before you reach England. For I am dying—dying. Stay! you'll find a photograph of Gwennie—one of my nieces, I mean—in my desk. Yes, that's it!'

'She is very beautiful.'

'I think so. Dear Gwennie! But, by-the-by—if you like the fancy—call this portrait my legacy to you. You're welcome. And now—go! Remember, her fortune rests solely with you—in *your hands*.'

There had been no time for more; no time to reveal the secret, even if Simon Pepworth—my dearest friend, a Brazilian diamond-merchant—had so minded. I, John Sherwood, mining engineer, had come to Buenos Ayres summoned there in all haste from up-country to the dying man's bedside. This momentous document, now in my possession, had been fully prepared and put under seal. My orders had been to take it with me, read and then destroy it as soon as the ship left port. Pepworth was dying—dead now, as I had no reason to doubt; and the place where his fortune in diamonds—now Gwennie Pepworth's fortune—was stowed away and the detailed instructions as to its disposal were at this midnight hour actually known to no living man.

I had contracted the fever during my hurried journey to the coast; and it was only now that I seriously realised the need to make myself, without another moment's loss of time, thoroughly acquainted with the contents of the sealed packet. Gwennie Pepworth's fortune, a fortune in Brazilian diamonds, was practically in my keeping. Everything seemed to depend on me; and it is not improbable, had there been time for deeper reflection, that I should have uttered a protest; the responsibility almost appalled me! Might not a single mishap make it possible that these diamonds would never again meet the light?

These thoughts sped swiftly through my brain as I broke the seal. My head throbbed more violently than ever; and when I came to unfold the document, all that was written there seemed nothing more to me than a blurred and blotted page.

Good heavens! had I put off the reading until it was too late? The ship was far out in the open, tearing through the sea on its home-

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ward voyage. The night sounded gusty; I could hear the plash and rush of the whirling surge against the vessel's side, hissing as it swept the deck; but above all other sounds came the beat and throb of the great screw. It seemed more than ever ominous in my ear, and I began to quake with alarm lest the secret should pass from me into another's custody. Why not carry this document to the ship's stern while I still had strength, and cast it into the sea? Would it not be best after all for Gwennie? Who could foretell into whose hands the diamonds might fall? Days might go by during which, in my fever-stricken state, I might possibly remain unconscious; and during those days a dozen or more on board—or, worse still, *one*—might read the document and become possessed of the secret!

The thought drove me still more frantic. Surely my friend Simon Pepworth was mad when he committed his secret to writing! But it was too late for regrets now—too late! I closed my eyes, and for a while sat motionless, making every effort to overcome my delirious fears; and at last I grew more calm. Again I opened my eyes to regard the page.

Yes, I could decipher the writing now; every word was wonderfully distinct; my eyesight seemed of a sudden to have cleared. The document was fairly brief and plainly indited; and I soon consigned to my memory every word of it. And now I felt as elated as if I had quaffed a bumper of champagne. The secret was my own—would be my own—the moment I had cast this document over the vessel's stern, as I had promised Pepworth I would do.

But as I sprang up with the firm resolve to keep my word, a sudden dizziness came over me, and the document fell from my grasp. I made a desperate effort to pick it up; but the cabin appeared to have become suddenly dark, and all sense of my surroundings, except of that overpowering beat of the screw, had fled from me; and then even that sense vanished away into silence as I gradually sank prostrate on the cabin floor.

Upon recovering consciousness I found that it was broad day. The light looked in at the round cabin window with dazzling brightness; but when my eyes had become accustomed to the glare I stared wonderingly around. I was lying snugly enough in my berth; but when I tried to lift myself upon my elbow I discovered that I was too weak to move an inch off my pillows. I lay with my hands feebly clasped behind my head and endeavoured to collect and formulate my scattered thoughts. All that had happened slowly recurred—all that had happened under the cabin lamp—the waking and the reading of the document entrusted to me by Simon Pepworth—came crowding in upon me.

What impressed me most, however, was the uncanny stillness on board. Had I lost all sense of hearing? No; for my long-drawn respiration

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fell distinctly upon my ear. The silence aboard was actual. Even the screw was at rest; not even the sound of a footstep on deck! The steamer lay as motionless and tranquil as a ship in port. In port? How could that be? Last night—surely last night—the vessel was out of sight of port.

Stay! Wasn't that the sound of a footstep in the corridor outside? 'Is any one there?' I cried.

The feebleness of my voice startled me. What could it mean?

The cabin door was quietly opened and the ship's doctor came in.

'Ah, my young friend!' said he cheerily, 'how goes it now?'

He seated himself beside the berth while speaking, touched my wrist professionally, and looked with unmistakable concern into my face.

'Doctor, what does all this mean?'

'What does all what mean?' said he.

'This absence of all noise, and'—

'You've been ill, like to die,' was the answer; 'just lingering for days between life and death. Let me advise you not to talk. You'—

'For days? How many days?'

'A fortnight this morning.'

'Mercy upon me! Have we reached Liverpool?'

The doctor nodded. 'Thirty-six hours ago.'

'Let me get up; let me get up!'

'Hush!' and the doctor put his hand entreatingly upon my shoulder. 'I'm going to mix you a sleeping-draught now. Time enough to talk about getting up to-morrow.'

I felt too exhausted for further words. The news that I had been for days without the least knowledge of what was going on around me acted as a great shock. The doctor scarcely seemed puzzled, however, at the pitiable state of agitation into which I had fallen; he doubtless attributed it entirely to physical weakness. The sedative which he hastened to administer had the desired effect; for I soon fell into a sound sleep, from which I did not wake till after sunrise upon the day following.

Now came the one dread thought: What had become of the Pepworth document? Into whose possession had it fallen? If into unscrupulous hands, the diamonds had—could I doubt it?—been already unearthed and spirited away! Lying there, I looked helplessly round the little cabin—looked round in blank despair. Had I by chance, during a delirious moment, gone upon deck and thrown the document over the ship's stern? I had seemed to do so a hundred times since that night upon which I broke the seal. But I could remember nothing clearly, not even my hundred and one hideous dreams. Yet I could not realise that the thing had vanished; and so soon as I grew stronger—strong enough to creep from my bunk—I made diligent search for it from cabin roof to

floor, but no trace of it anywhere—not even the oblong envelope which had held it—could I discover. It had, in some mysterious way, vanished!

Every hour of my convalescence, while resting in my cabin berth, I strove to recall to mind every thought or action upon that memorable night when I broke the seal and forced myself to read the Pepworth document. I recalled to mind peering in upon my fellow-passenger in the starboard bunk; I recalled to mind how that overmastering dizziness had seized me and the document had dropped from my hand. What had happened subsequently? That was the question which perplexed and mystified me to the point of madness! If I had not cast the packet over the ship's stern, as projected—if it had rested upon the cabin floor after I lapsed into unconsciousness—in whose hands was it now? All the passengers, as well as a large portion of the ship's crew, had left the vessel, and were already scattered to the four winds. If the document had fallen into honest hands would it not have been given back to me, or at least placed among the papers in the unlocked valise at my berth-side? But no reference whatsoever had been made to it. The ship's doctor obviously had no knowledge of its existence; and I grew convinced that reticence was the wisest course for me to pursue—the wisest at least until I had gained sufficient strength to make the journey to London and act for myself.

One day, however, the doctor nearly succeeded in winning my confidence.

'Mr Sherwood,' said he, with his hand upon my shoulder, 'you've something on your mind. Can I do nothing for you? This mental worry is retarding your recovery, and'—

'Something is troubling me,' said I. 'By-the-bye, where was I found when I lost my wits? It was in the dead of night—that I do know; but was it here or on deck, or?'—

'Here,' said the doctor; 'on the floor of this cabin.'

'You're sure,' said I tentatively, 'that I wasn't near the ship's stern? I have got it into my head that I was watching the water churned into foam by the ship's screw.'

'Ah! you raved about that; you had got the screw on the brain,' said the doctor; 'and more than once you struggled to leave your berth and go on deck. I gathered from your half-coherent words that you wanted to throw something—I could never make out what it was—overboard. It was quite piteous.'

There was a moment's pause. Then I said, 'Who was the first to enter this cabin after I became insensible?'

'Who? Why, the second-mate,' said the doctor. 'He heard a groan as he passed the door, and he looked in upon you.'

'What's his name?'

'The second-mate's? Why, Gedge—Edward Gedge.'

'Is he aboard?'

'No. He started yesterday for New York.'

'New York! Pray, tell me, did he find no—speak of having found nothing—I mean, on this cabin floor?'

'Nothing, as far as I know,' said the doctor, smilingly, 'except yourself. He lifted you into your bunk and then sent for me.' Then the doctor added, as he looked keenly into my face, 'You have lost something you value greatly. That's what is worrying you—isn't it?'

I made no answer. A sense of dread certainty came over me, and I could not trust myself to speak. Edward Gedge, the absent mate, was the man who had become possessed of the Pepworth document. After he had placed me in my bunk, the document had caught his eye, and he had quickly discovered its worth. For was there not indicated therein the place where a dead man's diamonds, valued at half-a-million pounds sterling, had been stowed away? The discovery had staggered the man; the prize thus flashed before his eyes had proved too dazzling. Half-a-million! Yes; and then—then he had gone to the place indicated, had secured the diamonds, and had taken flight!

I left my cabin on the following day, though by no means fully restored to health, and started for London. The moment the train left Liverpool Station I took from an inner pocket the one thing left me—a thing that in my heart I prized far more than the Pepworth document—her photograph. Not that it was by any means the first time I had taken it out—by any means the first time I had gazed in admiration of the lovely face. I had long ago learnt to regard it as my ideal, to look upon it as a man might look upon the portrait of the woman he loves. I had begun to weave round this same portrait a halo of romance, in truth, before I had actually realised that she—Gwennie—was Simon Pepworth's niece. I had seen it lying upon Pepworth's study-table at Buenos Ayres before I came to know the merchant intimately, before he elected to bestow the portrait upon me as a dying gift. I now regarded it as a legacy—a priceless one; for I nursed the belief—vain fool that I was!—that in this delicate action on his part he had willed Gwennie Pepworth—her sweet self—to me.

I was alone in the railway carriage. I had bribed the guard to let me remain undisturbed during the journey; for the moment had come—a moment that I had delayed in facing until it could be delayed no longer. The moment had come for grappling with the bare and repulsive facts. The needful courage had been wanting; until now I had dreaded to admit that something more disastrous than the purloining of the Pepworth document—if anything could be more disastrous—had overtaken me: my memory had

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failed. It was useless to hide the truth from myself an hour longer. The acute attack of fever aboard ship had, in some inexplicable way, benumbed my brain and stolen from my recollection every word—every word from first to last—contained in the Pepworth document.

In the hurried moment of parting, Pepworth had assured me that every requisite detail with regard to the diamonds would be therein found. Not only should I learn their place of concealment; I should be informed as to the name and address, with many other particulars, of his legal adviser in London, a man in whom I might place every reliance; I should be informed—and this gave me the most concern—as to the whereabouts in London of his niece—the beautiful girl to whom he had willed all his great wealth—Gwennie Pepworth.

How fervently I hoped and believed, as I grew stronger, that my memory touching these details, which I knew had been set down in the document, would be restored! But I had hoped hitherto in vain. The dark spot in my brain—as I felt forced to call it—still remained unilluminated. When would the light succeed in penetrating there? I shrank even now from the self-imposed task of contemplation! Each night, during my tedious recovery, I had settled down in my bunk with an eager longing for sleep that the morrow might come the sooner—the morrow which must make all clear to me once more. Would the new life—the whirl and tumult of the vast Metropolis—stir into activity that corner of my memory which still lay dormant?

It was night. The train was rattling along in hot haste; and at last the dull-red glow reflected in the distant sky, like the reflected glow from some enormous forge, gave indications that London would soon be reached. I lowered the carriage window and gazed out upon this expanse of lamplit night in blank dismay; for where in all this vast and brightly-lighted area into which I was being borne with reckless speed was Gwennie's home?

As I drove through the streets of London that night to my hotel, the cry, 'I shall never find her!' broke from me; for at this moment I felt like one struck blind. I was groping hopelessly in the dark; but suddenly a bright thought came to me. I raised the trap-door in the cab roof and said, 'Nearest telegraph-office.' I determined to despatch a message to the shrewdest friend I knew, with the intention of seeking his advice; and the resolve brought with it a ray of hope. An hour later, while passing to and fro in my bedroom at a central hotel, waiting anxiously for his answer, a telegram was placed in my hand. It ran as follows:

'Shall expect you to-night.—BUCKMASTER.'

Stepping into a cab, I was rapidly taken in the direction of Tottenham Court Road. My search for Gwennie Pepworth had already begun—for Gwennie and her diamonds.

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The house at which the cab presently stopped was quaintly situated. The entrance was at the corner of an ill-lighted street, while the front part of the building stood in a brightly-lit thoroughfare. The ground floor of this house was occupied by a big firm of goldsmiths and pawnbrokers, their shop windows brilliant with jewellery of every description. The door in the dark street had no knocker, but I found a button which communicated upon pressure with an electric bell. A tall, broad-shouldered manservant answered the summons.

'Mr Buckmaster in?'

He led the way along a passage and up a flight of stairs. Here was a landing where there was a lamp resting on a bracket. The servant opened a door facing me, and I now passed into a room luxuriously furnished. But there was one odd thing about it: the blinds of the large bay-window were drawn up, and the room was entirely lighted by the glare from the great thoroughfare upon which it looked out. A close-shaven man, with straight eyebrows that seemed to add keenness to his small dark eyes, was seated there, so that the light was thrown directly upon his face and well-knit figure.

'Well?' said he, rising to greet me. 'You want my help—do you? You're welcome, my boy. What's the affair? Love, or?'

'An affair,' I interposed, glancing about me, 'that will need the utmost secrecy. If—if we should be overheard?'

'Ah! I see,' said Buckmaster, 'you are in' a highly nervous state. Ill? Well, in that case, wouldn't you be happier if we went for an hour's rattle over the highways? We shan't be overheard out there,' and he waved his hand towards the window. 'Most of my clients tell me their secrets in hansom-cabs. Besides,' he added, with a shrewd look, 'I can glance about me and get ideas. I generally meet with my best notions out there in that noise and glitter.'

We passed into the street, and Buckmaster hailed a cab.

'Well,' said he as we drove along, 'what is it all about?'

'I'll tell you,' said I, 'in two words. I've lost recollection as to the whereabouts of half-a-million pounds.'

'In notes or gold?'

'Neither. In diamonds,' said I; 'so I thought I'd look you up, old friend.'

Buckmaster's features underwent no change of expression. His quick eye shifted unceasingly from one side to the other of the busy thoroughfares we traversed: he seemed to miss nobody, to lose sight of nothing, in the crowd; and yet it was my face, as I felt, that was all the while the object of the keenest interest to him.

'Try a cigar,' said he, producing a well-stocked case. 'You'll find these excellent.'

I lit a cigar. I had sought the counsel of this friend fully resolved to keep nothing from him.

Besides, Buckmaster possessed almost mesmeric power, as he well knew, in the way of winning one's confidence. All my reticence vanished. I told him everything—everything at least that had happened as far as I could remember—with regard to the Pepworth document and its unaccountable disappearance, not even keeping back one thought which might help to elucidate the mystery.

'Ah! So there's a lady in the affair—is there?'

'Yes; and if I could only remember where she lives.'

'Stop a minute!' said Buckmaster. 'There are three questions to consider before that—questions of far greater importance.'

'More importance than —'

'Yes, my boy. In the first place, then, did you throw the document over the ship's stern? In the second place, supposing you did *not*, but left it where it fell upon your cabin floor—was it appropriated by Gedge, the second-mate?'

'Well! and in the third place?'

'Thirdly, did your fellow-passenger—the man in the starboard bunk—wake up and grab the document before the mate entered the cabin?'

'That's it, Buckmaster,' said I; 'that's it, in a nutshell.'

Buckmaster nodded. 'We'll tackle the last question first,' said he. 'What did you say was the name of the man who slept in the starboard berth, behind that convenient red curtain?'

'Wildreck,' said I.

'Now, what do you know about *him*?'

'Nothing, and I could learn nothing, except,' said I, 'that he took train to London upon the morning on which the *La Plata* reached Liverpool.'

'But what was he like?'

'I've no recollection,' was my reply.

'No? And yet,' said Buckmaster, 'you looked at him—studied his face closely under the cabin lamp before breaking open the sealed envelope—didn't you?'

'Yes; it was the first and last time I ever saw him. His look repelled me; that's all I can recall. I've forgotten every feature of the man's face, as I have forgotten every word written in the Pepworth document.'

'Ah! Now, I wonder,' said Buckmaster, looking with greater keenness at the passers-by in the crowded streets—'I wonder if you'd know him if brought face to face with him once more?'

'I can only hope so,' said I.

'Well, don't lose heart, my boy. Keep a keen lookout.'

The days that now went by—interminable days of waiting for some word or even sign from Buckmaster—were passed by me in futile wanderings through London. I kept a keen out-

look, as my friend had suggested, but no face in the streets recalled the face of Wildreck, my fellow-passenger. But there was another face—the face of Gwennie Pepworth—that I was far more eager to discover there.

More than a week had gone by since my midnight drive with Buckmaster, when, one afternoon, a strange thing happened. I had passed aimlessly out of Fleet Street into Fetter Lane. In my wearisome peregrinations I had adopted no plan, but had roamed without premeditation; and this afternoon, for no motive that was to me in the least apparent, I found myself passing from Fetter Lane through an old and narrow gateway like an unguarded entrance leading into some prison-yard; and presently I discovered the place to be an ancient Inn of Chancery, with two other narrow gateways, each in a separate court or quadrangle, and each giving access into a separate and noisy thoroughfare. Here it was, however, delightfully silent and deserted, with a diminutive, railed-in garden on one side; and I felt irresistibly tempted to pace to and fro within the quiet precincts. Something—I could not yet find words to express the strange sensation—impelled me to linger here. It seemed, in some inexplicable way, that I had entered these precincts once before. But when? That was the question which floated through my mind and filled my thoughts with a confused sense of expectation too perplexing for words. Until now—though London was not absolutely unknown to me—I had never dreamt that this quaint corner had any existence. Yet stay! Could it have been, by any remote chance, that in the Pepworth document a description of this legal retreat had been set down for my special guidance?

As the surmise came upon me—almost, as it seemed to me, at the very same moment—a soft and hurried footstep caught my ear. I glanced round. A girl, in a tight-fitting coat and a bewitching 'Gainsborough,' glided across the court towards the gateway leading into Chancery Lane. But it was the face, the expression in the girl's eyes as she glanced at me in passing, that riveted my gaze and set my heart beating fast, and brought a name to my lips: 'Gwennie!'

CHAPTER II.

THE SEALED PACKET.



SPRANG impulsively forward, but the girl took no heed; or, if she heeded me, she made no sign unless it were to hasten her steps. Now a mist rose before my eyes, my strength seemed leaving me, and I was compelled to clutch at the garden railing to save myself from falling.

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Before I could recover sufficiently to speak the girl had passed out at the Chancery Lane entrance and was out of sight. The moment I could stagger across the court I went after her, but although I looked eagerly in every direction beyond the gateway, and up and down each thoroughfare, no glimpse of her was visible; she had vanished.

I turned back into the old Inn, crushed and disconsolate, and again commenced pacing to and fro. This place had come to have a still more strange and haunting effect upon me; the very flagstones and antique walls seemed to possess, as it were, some magnetic force that attracted me. Or was it an atmosphere of romance, wafted there by *her* presence, creeping over the neglected garden and an antique quadrangle, and penetrating the open doorways that led to the various floors of the time-worn, winding stairs?

It was growing dusk, and as I peered around, staring up those staircases, and studying with unwonted curiosity every name that I found painted beside their arched and grimy entrances, my look of a sudden became fixed upon a name that sent an electric shock into my brain: 'Mr Whitsmith, second floor.' My head began to throb, and for some moments I could again feel the vibrations of the great screw, and hear its shuddering pulsations beating in my ear. It seemed as though I were again aboard the steamship—again in my lamp-lit cabin—with the opening words in the Pepworth document passing before my eyes! Whitsmith! Yes, that was clearly the name of the lawyer, the name of Gwennie Pepworth's guardian; and this was the place Simon Pepworth had notified in black and white—notified as the place I was to seek out the instant I reached London.

I stood in a state of abject bewilderment at the foot of the stairs. How could I have the effrontery to face her guardian—without the diamonds? I could not admit to him that the Pepworth document was lost unless my detective friend Buckmaster worked miracles for me. I walked up and down in the fast-gathering twilight—walked up and down until the night had entirely closed in. A solitary gas-lamp in the court flickered dimly. I was fiercely striving to pierce my way into the pages of that document, but no effort would yet carry my recollection as to the wording of it beyond the name of Whitsmith, Gwennie's chosen guardian, whom I was instructed to visit. Beyond that point in my memory an impenetrable black shadow, as it were, seemed cast.

At last I turned in at the entrance and went, like one only half-wakened out of a dream, up the creaking stairs that led to Mr Whitsmith's door. However, I roused myself by a desperate effort of will when I reached the second landing, and knocked deliberately, though the sound sent a tremor through me; and it is not improbable that I should have attempted to escape from 1900.]

this ordeal—have taken to flight—had not the summons been promptly answered.

An elderly, benevolent-faced gentleman looked out abruptly upon me.

'Mr Whitsmith?' I ventured to ask.

'Why, yes,' was the answer, given in a cheery voice—'yes. And pray what can I do for you?'

His whole manner, as well as his tone, was really so genial and reassuring that the panic which my imagination had created quickly subsided.

'I have called to see you,' said I, 'at the special request of the late Mr Pepworth. You'—

'Pepworth? Bless me!—not Simon Pepworth?'

'Yes. I'—

'Pray come in.'

A door on the opposite side of the little square lobby stood invitingly open, revealing a cosy, green-panelled sitting-room. I stepped in, followed by Mr Whitsmith.

'One moment,' said he, with an incipient air of mystery as he closed the sitting-room door; you are—I suppose you are—the engineer, Mr John Sherwood?'

'That is my name. I'—

'Stop! Perhaps,' said Mr Whitsmith, crossing over to an open bureau on which stood a shaded lamp, 'we shall do well to prove your identity—it's a mere matter of form—before we proceed a step further. As the late Mr Pepworth's lawyer my position is one of responsibility. Will you sit down?'

Mr Whitsmith placed a chair for me at the desk, and then went on.

'Now,' said he, 'write your name—your ordinary signature—across this slip of paper. That will settle the question.'

'As to my identity?'

'Yes.'

When I had written my name and handed it to Mr Whitsmith, not without some show of nervousness and misgiving, his smile quickly put me once more at my ease.

'I've got your signature in that tin box,' said he, pointing to one marked S. P. among a row of tin boxes, 'in which I keep the late Mr Simon Pepworth's deeds and other papers. Now, come and take this arm-chair at my fireside. You are John Sherwood beyond any reasonable doubt, and I am delighted to make your acquaintance. I've been looking forward to this meeting—looking anxiously forward to it—for many a day. We have affairs of some moment to talk over and arrange. Take this chair.'

When I had taken the arm-chair indicated, and had sunk back into it with every attempt to appear at home, I felt more than ever, in my own secret heart, disposed to seek refuge in flight. For what would this man's attitude be towards me—this lawyer with his sense of responsibility

—when he knew, as he soon must know, the whole truth?

For the moment, however, I was safe. He had apparently no thought to discuss the affairs of Simon Pepworth to-night, and I gradually regained confidence. A delightful sense of restfulness came over me; I felt that my wanderings through the London streets in quest of Gwennie Pepworth had come to an end. Beside this bright fire, with the window curtains closely drawn, and with no lamplight except the shaded one upon the bureau, I was almost jubilant—for the hour. I should be taken and introduced to Gwennie on the morrow, at latest, by her excellent guardian. Of this I had not a shadow of doubt; and I had difficulty in hiding the sense of pleasure which the prospect held out, in spite of every contingency, in spite of the desolation that threatened me in the near future.

‘Where are you staying?’ said the lawyer. ‘With friends, or?’—

I mentioned my hotel.

‘Ah! We must get you into more homely quarters. You look far from strong,’ said Mr Whitsmith with concern. ‘You’ve not been ill, I hope?’

‘Very ill,’ I said. ‘During the later part of the voyage—so the doctor told me—I was lingering between life and death.’

‘Dear me! Perhaps,’ said the lawyer, glancing from me towards the tin box—‘perhaps I oughtn’t to trouble you at present—at least for a day or two—about this matter of Simon Pepworth, deceased. And yet the business is urgent.’

‘I could hardly yet bear the fatigue,’ said I wearily. ‘Still, of course, if you insist’—

He placed his hand soothingly upon my shoulder. ‘Don’t be uneasy! I’ve only one word to say. Will you allow me? Then we’ll dismiss the subject until you’re strong enough to give me your undivided attention.’

While speaking he lifted the deed-box marked S. P. upon the centre-table, and then he began to pace up and down, rattling a bunch of keys in his hand.

‘Mr Sherwood,’ said he, pausing to tap the tin box impressively, ‘my instructions from Simon Pepworth about a certain sealed packet which I’ve got locked up here are very puzzling—so puzzling that at certain moments I’ve felt sorely tempted—I wouldn’t for a pension confess it to any one but you—sorely tempted to solve the riddle by breaking the seal.’

His words set my heart beating fast.

‘A sealed packet! May I see it?’

Mr Whitsmith looked thoughtfully at the tin box.

‘Why, yes. I can raise no objection—no, none whatever; for it concerns you deeply—concerns you no less than myself.’

He at once proceeded to unlock the box, drew forth a packet, and placed it in my hand.

At sight of it I had started to my feet with an involuntary cry upon my lips; for so closely did the packet resemble the blue oblong envelope—the envelope which had contained the Pepworth document entrusted to me—that for one delirious moment I believed that I again held it in my grasp. Even the superscription, ‘*Re Simon Pepworth, deceased,*’ written across it in bold caligraphy, closely resembled the one once possessed by me; and the size of the packet was identically the same. But when I came to examine it more narrowly, I discovered that the seal set upon this one had seemingly never been touched. How, then, could it be the same? The seal to my own packet had been broken by me; my memory was clear on that point. What, then, could this sealed packet—a packet that now suggested a duplicate copy—possibly denote?

The question was on my lips, but Mr Whitsmith’s eye, bent keenly upon me, as I fancied, stemmed the impulse. Without word or comment I handed the packet back.

He placed it in the tin box and turned the key upon it, and I sank into my chair again with a suppressed sense of momentary relief. I certainly had not yet the needful strength to tackle a matter so ominous as this one already threatened to prove. In a day or two, as he had proposed, I might have braced myself to face the ordeal, but I was not prepared to face it yet.

‘Now,’ said the lawyer, with a wave of his hand, as if to dismiss from his mind the tin box and all it contained, ‘what do you say to joining us at dinner to-night? I need hardly tell you that you will be made more than welcome.’

‘You mean?’—I said tentatively.

‘Why, at Guilford Street, of course,’ said the lawyer, nodding good-humouredly. ‘We dine at seven.’

I hastened back to my hotel to dress for dinner, but before going up to my room I consulted the London Directory. By good chance I found the name of Whitsmith (below the name of Clixby) at 83A Guilford Street, Bloomsbury. I was elated at my discovery, and as I drove along a sense of expectation, strange and indefinable, came over me. What was it? I feared to give rein to my thought, for the half-awakened fancy might end in nought.

A neat maid-servant who came to the door led me unquestioningly upstairs, and announced me as ‘Mr Sherwood.’

I stepped into the room—a large drawing-room. Standing over the hearth and rubbing his hands together in a sportful sort of manner was Mr Whitsmith. He looked round over his shoulder at me as I came in with a nod and a welcoming smile.

‘Ah! you’ve found your way to the old house—have you?’

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'Why, yes! And do you know, Mr Whit-smith,' said I, looking curiously round the room, 'I somehow think, or else I've dreamed it, I must have been here before.'

'Think so, do you?' and Mr Whit-smith chuckled as though he regarded my observation in the light of a joke.

Again I looked round me. The drawing-room had panelled walls, painted grey, with many water-colour drawings of scenes in the Brazils—scenes which I knew well. The furniture was old-fashioned, of the style in vogue a century ago. There was an inner room beyond, its folding-door standing open; here there was a piano, and vases of flowers tastefully arranged—arranged by a woman's delicate hand, as I felt little doubt. Indeed, while Mr Whit-smith and I were still talking, the door of this inner or music room opened, and a tall girl glided in. She was simply clad in an evening-dress, something of a crimson silky texture, with no ornament save a diamond necklace about her full and shapely throat. She came smilingly towards the lawyer, who advanced from the hearth with outstretched hands.

'Gwennie,' said he, 'this is Mr Sherwood, your uncle Pepworth's friend, from Buenos Ayres.'

I took the hand she held out to me, and looked wonderingly into her face. It was the girl who had crossed the twilight Inn—the girl I had pursued and lost sight of in Chancery Lane—barely three hours ago.

We dined, as I well recall, in a cosy back room downstairs. The table was laid for four, and upon entering the room we found a stiff-necked, elderly lady, prim and respectful to the point of irony, awaiting us there. She seated herself at the head of the table; she seemed to claim the place as one to which she had an exclusive right. I found myself seated opposite to Gwennie.

At dinner Mr Whit-smith took occasion to relate how seriously ill I had been during the homeward voyage, and I gained more than one sympathetic glance from the girl before the recital was over. But Mrs Clixby, as I understood the stiff-necked lady to be, appeared the while to be regarding me furtively; there seemed an expression of incredulity or doubt in her sphinx-like attitude. I could almost imagine that her thin lips shaped themselves into the unspoken words, 'I have my suspicions.' Presently, when she addressed the lawyer—she pointedly avoided addressing me—her remark filled me with uneasiness at first.

'I needn't remind you, sir,' said she, 'that the parlour is vacant. He has come to London to stop a while, I should hope. He ain't going to run away to-morrow; and if it's looking after he requires, or watching'—

'A capital suggestion,' said the lawyer. 'What do you say, Mr Sherwood?'

'What do I say?'

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'Ah! let me explain,' said Mr Whit-smith. 'This house belongs to the Pepworth estate, and Mrs Clixby is our tenant. Being a lady of social proclivities, she has very sensibly decided to sublet two or three floors, for the house is a large one. Our kind hostess is a widow without family, excepting a married daughter who resides abroad. Mr Pepworth, as you are aware, had rooms here'—

'Not vacant just now,' the landlady interposed.

'Precisely; and Gwennie, being a young lady of fortune,' said the lawyer in a tone of pleasantry, 'occupies the drawing-room floor. For my part, I've a bachelor suite on the top floor, which I haven't used, except as a store-room for books and bundles of old law-papers, for quite an age. It crossed my mind to have the rooms cleared out and fitted up for you. But Mrs Clixby has reminded me that the parlours chance to be unoccupied at the moment, and you couldn't do better, therefore, than settle down in them during your stay in town.'

I now turned to Mrs Clixby with a sense of relief and said, 'Would to-morrow be too soon to have my luggage sent over from the hotel?'

Mrs Clixby persisted in addressing Mr Whit-smith, as though the question had come from him.

'As you know, sir, an hour's notice is all I ever need. To-morrow will suit me perfectly.'

I forgave her disregard of me—would have forgiven her had she openly denounced me as a suspicious character; for by placing the parlours at my disposal she was bringing me near to Gwennie. Yes—I was going to reside beneath the same roof with her! The prospect filled me with delight, and the very thought of it drove from my mind for the moment all the rankling uncertainty concerning the safety of the dead man's diamonds and the dread ordeal which must sooner or later be faced.

Every detail connected with that evening passed in Gwennie's drawing-rooms has impressed itself upon my mind as no event in my life has done before or ever can do hereafter. She entertained us in a blithe, enchanting manner. She sang for us a number of songs, sprightly and sublime, and played to us nocturnes and sonatas in a style that an artiste could not have surpassed; and that evening I fell in love.

For a brief half-hour, while Mr Whit-smith had the complacency to doze over one of the nocturnes, and Mrs Clixby was constrained to give attention to an affair below-stairs, I had her entirely to myself. I drew my chair closer to the piano, and while her fingers went melodiously over the keys, making her soft voice seem the softer, she said, 'I have been wondering, Mr Sherwood, why you walked up and down, up and down, in front of that old garden this afternoon'—

'You saw me?'

'Looking so deep in thought—so deeply meditative—instead of coming upstairs to Mr Whitsmith's rooms,' she went on.

'But'—

'I wondered who you could be,' she said. 'I never dreamt, of course, that the sedate gentleman pacing the court like a sentinel could be my uncle Pepworth's friend, and that I should meet him to-night as I have had the pleasure of doing.'

'Miss Pepworth,' said I, looking into her bright face, 'may I tell you what I was actually thinking about?'

'Yes, pray do,' said she, 'if it's no secret. I am all curiosity to know.'

'Shall I not offend you?'

'No. I can't believe that possible.'

'Well, then,' said I, 'to tell you the truth, strange as it may seem, I was thinking about—you.'

'Me? How strange! I'—

At this moment Mrs Clixby re-entered the drawing-room, and presently Mr Whitsmith opened his eyes. Any further talk between us to-night was now impossible; it was growing late, and I caught the landlady's gaze upon me—which seemed to mean that at this hour a convalescent ought to be abed; so I lingeringly bade them 'Good-night.'

I skilfully contrived to put off my interview with the worthy lawyer for some days. I pleaded indisposition, and not without some truth. I visited no one, not even Buckmaster.

But when I had got thoroughly settled down in the parlours at Guilford Street, Mr Whitsmith cornered me. I could find no plausible excuse for further delay; and one autumn afternoon, when the leaves were falling from the old trees in Clifford's Inn, and the wind was going gustily about the courts and staircases, I mounted the steps once more to Mr Whitsmith's floor. He was there, waiting for me; and when he had let me in and welcomed me with his wonted show of cordiality, he placed a chair for me near the bright fire. Then he lighted the shaded lamp and drew the window-curtains close, shutting out the gleam of murky daylight that still remained. Every word and every action on Mr Whitsmith's part during that interview has clung to my recollection ever since.

He now lifted the tin box—the one with Pepworth's initials upon it—once more upon the table; then he unlocked it, raised the lid, and looked inside. He appeared deeply thoughtful; and I kept silent, waiting for him to speak.

'When Mr Pepworth gave me this sealed packet,' said he, drawing it out and turning it over in his hands, 'he was on the eve of starting from London on what proved to be his last journey to Buenos Ayres. It is now about a year ago. He told me when leaving that, should he die abroad, I was to break this seal and carry out the instructions given here.'

A sense of suspense, in which was mingled hope and fear, now came over me.

'Then,' the lawyer went on, 'came a letter from Mr Pepworth, only a few weeks ago, giving me to understand that he was placing with you, under seal, a similar document to this one. Have I been rightly informed?'

'Similar to that one?' said I. 'Maybe! But if you will break the seal and allow me to glance through the contents I shall better be able to answer whether it is so or not. I can tell you one thing, however. When dying, upon the night on which I took passage by the steamship *La Plata* from Buenos Ayres, Mr Pepworth entrusted to my care a packet—an oblong blue packet duly sealed, resembling, to all outward appearance, the one you at this moment are turning over in your hand.'

'Ah! that is all I have need to know. The contents are the same. I will answer for that.'

He came over to the hearth while speaking, and seating himself in a chair close beside the glowing fire, looked into it with a strangely concentrated look.

'Break the seal!' cried I excitedly. 'Let me read the contents; let me see if all that is written there is the same—the same'—

'Break the seal?' said Mr Whitsmith in a slow, deliberative tone. 'Yes—that's the point I am coming to now. One moment.'

His look became more concentrated than before. Then he went on:

'If I were to break the seal and let you read what's written here, you could no doubt say—could you not?—whether what I hold here is a duplicate of the document given by Mr Pepworth to you?'

'Yes, certainly, I could tell you that. Why?'

'On your word, Mr Sherwood!' said Mr Whitsmith earnestly; 'you are sure—absolutely sure?'

'Yes. I broke the seal of my packet one night aboard ship,' said I, my heart sinking within me, 'and read the document from first to last.'

'Ah! that's what I wanted to know,' said Mr Whitsmith; 'for it is all I was instructed to ask you. And now I will carry out my orders from Mr Pepworth without more delay. You, Mr Sherwood—you are the chosen witness to my act and deed. Look!'

He then bent forward, and before I could utter a protest he had thrust the sealed packet deep among the glowing coals.

With a cry of wild despair, I sprang up and made a frantic effort to save it from the blaze. But it was too late. The packet had already burst into flames.

I reeled towards Mr Whitsmith, conscious of a mad flash in my eye as the hoarse whisper broke from my lips:

'Great heavens! Do you know what you've done?'

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CHAPTER III.

THE LOCKED DOOR.



My panic-stricken tone and attitude seemed to stagger him. As soon as he could recover voice Mr Whit-smith said :

'I've done my duty. Can you suppose that I wantonly destroyed that sealed packet?'

'No; you could not know—it may be days before you realise—the injury you have done me, and still more Mr Pepworth's niece.'

He listened to my words in blank surprise. 'Done her an injury? I hope not. Yet, perhaps I ought to have explained my motive more fully—more lucidly—before destroying that packet. Perhaps'—

'Explain it now,' said I entreatingly; 'let me hear why you have done this.'

'I will; and I shall soon convince you,' said he confidently, 'that I have religiously followed out the instructions given me by my client.'

'What! By Mr Pepworth?'

'Yes. The moment you reached England, the moment you reported yourself to me,' said the lawyer, 'and the moment I had ascertained that you, as agreed, had broken open the sealed packet, Mr Sherwood, and had digested the contents of the document placed therein, I was instructed by Mr Pepworth to burn the packet placed by him in my hands without opening it.'

'Go on,' said I, pressing my hands to my head.

'You have reached England, you have reported yourself to me,' he went on, 'and you have given me your assurance that you have made yourself acquainted with all the information that packet contained. Now, that being so—learning from you that you have done this—all that remained for me to do was what I have just done—destroy my packet in your presence.'

'Well?'

'It was a fac-simile of the document handed to you under seal by Mr Pepworth when dying, and that fac-simile was merely sent to me as a safeguard, so to speak. It was sent in order to enable me to act for Mr Pepworth in case the ship in which you took passage from Buenos Ayres should be lost.'

'Ah! Had the *La Plata* been lost, or had I died during the voyage, you would never have destroyed that packet?'

'No. I should have broken the seal and mastered the contents, if'—

Once more I started up from my chair. The dread that had been working in my brain at last found expression in words.

'You knew nothing of the contents?'

'Nothing,' said he. 'Not one word.'

His answer came like a stab, and I sank 1900.]

beneath it as though I had been wounded mortally. A moment ago I could have learnt the place—the secret place—in which the dead man's diamonds were stowed away, and now it could never be! Gwennie's fortune was irretrievably lost.

My health was still feeble; the shock was too severe; and now a sense of intense faintness came over me; I passed into unconsciousness once more.

For some days I remained in a state of nervous prostration. I could not leave my rooms. Mr Whit-smith looked in upon me frequently, but he never suspected the truth. He was deeply concerned about me; he did most of the talking, yet he never once referred to that interview between us in his rooms in Clifford's Inn.

Simon Pepworth's injunction to the lawyer to destroy the sealed packet the moment he had satisfied himself that I possessed the knowledge of its contents convinced me that his motive had been to constitute me sole custodian of Gwennie's fortune. If Mr Whit-smith knew—which I greatly doubted—of the existence of the diamonds, he exhibited no anxiety concerning them, never throwing out a hint on the subject. He appeared to consider my complete recovery more important than anything else, as far as I could discover; and so further days of grace were given me in which to deliberate as to the method to adopt when disclosing, as I was resolved to do, the disastrous condition of affairs.

Mrs Clixby proved herself the best of friends, for she used every device she could think of in order to throw Gwennie and myself together. I soon became confident that she could have had no serious suspicion of me, no actual knowledge of the situation in which I was placed with regard to Mr Pepworth's niece. It was at Mrs Clixby's suggestion that, as soon as I was well enough to ascend the stairs, I came to take tea in Gwennie's music-room every afternoon; and the good woman often contrived to leave us alone. So it came to pass that my love for Gwennie grew deeper and deeper, though I realised all the while that when she came to know everything she might perhaps pity me—possibly condone my want of moral courage; but her feeling towards me would really be one of supreme contempt.

One evening when Mrs Clixby came in with my tea-tray—Gwennie having gone out to pay some afternoon calls—I put a question to her which I had hitherto persistently shrunk from putting to any one, so distasteful had the very thought of the dead man's diamonds become.

'I've been wondering,' said I, 'which were Mr Pepworth's rooms in this old house.'

'Mr Pepworth's rooms, sir?' said the landlady. 'Why, I thought you knew that the dining-rooms were the ones he occupied.'

'Opposite to mine—to these rooms? I should

like to look at them when you can spare five minutes.'

'I'd spare 'em now, sir, and welcome,' said she; 'but the door's locked.'

'Locked!'

'And the key has been taken away.'

'Taken away! You don't mean by Mr Pepworth when?'—

'Oh no! By a lodger,' she explained—'the gentleman I'm expecting back every day. But I've got another key to the door, if I could only lay my hands on it. Perhaps Miss Pepworth might know. I'll ask her when she comes in.'

Then she went on to tell me in a voluble manner how this gentleman had driven to the house one day in a cab with two portmanteaus and a valise, and had engaged the rooms for a month, paying her in advance; and how, on the morning after his arrival, he was called away unexpectedly on business.

'It's now three weeks ago,' she concluded.

'I fancy every cab-wheel must be his.'

'A week before I came?'

'Ten days,' said Mrs Clixby, with precision; and then, after a moment's reflection, she mentioned the day of the month.

'The 20th of September,' said I, growing suddenly interested; for by a strange—indeed it seemed to me startling—coincidence, it chanced to be the very date on which the *La Plata* had landed her passengers at Liverpool. A thought flashed into my mind.

'May I ask,' said I, 'whether these rooms of mine were also vacant when this gentleman came to inquire for apartments?'

'Yes; but he didn't seem partial to the parlours. He showed a preference for the dining-rooms—for Mr Pepworth's rooms, as I mostly call 'em.'

'He showed a preference for Mr Pepworth's rooms?'

'A very distinct preference, sir,' said she; and then she added, noticing my keen look, 'Might he happen to be known to you?'

'I wonder—I wonder if—— But what does his name chance to be?'

'Gedge.'

'Gedge!' cried I, clutching at the arms of my chair. 'Not—not Edward Gedge?'

'That is the name,' said the landlady; 'Mr Edward Gedge. Then you do know him, sir?'

What answer I gave Mrs Clixby I do not recollect. All I now know is that I instantly telegraphed to my detective friend Buckmaster: 'Call on me to-night. Very urgent.'

Within the hour, while I was standing at my parlour window looking impatiently out into the ill-lighted street, Buckmaster's inevitable hansom stopped at the door.

Buckmaster beckoned me from his cab to join him, and I went out. I was quickly on the seat at his side, and we drove as before through the great thoroughfares of the crowded city.

'Well?' said he, offering me a cigar.

We had not met since the night of my arrival in London, though I had written to him communicating my full address in Guilford Street, expressing at the same time a desire to see him; but he had given no heed to my letter beyond a line of acknowledgment.

'Well,' he reiterated, directing his keen glance unceasingly from side to side, 'have you cleared up that diamond mystery at last?'

His question was the very one which I might with reason have put to him. 'No: but I'm on that villain's track.'

'What villain?'

'The man who stole that document from the cabin,' said I. 'Have you lost *your* memory?'

He gave me a quick, humorous glance of reproach.

'I beg your pardon,' said I contritely.

'What man do you mean?' said he. 'That man in the starboard berth?'

'No; I mean Gedge, the second-mate. He took rooms in the house in which I am lodging on the very night of the day upon which the *La Plata* reached Liverpool.'

'Did he though? Come! that's very remarkable.'

I saw a smile flit over his face as he spoke, though what the smile meant—whether intended to express his scorn for my powers of induction—I could not then decide. But at Buckmaster's request I proceeded to relate all that had happened since we had met. I told him of my romantic encounter with Gwennie, my discovery of Mr Whitsmith, and the interview that had taken place between us—every detail connected with those days of suspense.

No word that I spoke—no look, as I well perceived—escaped my friend, and when I had finished, 'Sherwood, my boy,' said he, 'I may wire you any moment now. Keep a lookout. Be in readiness for another little drive with me; and mind, the news I shall have for you may be strange—even startling; so the quicker you get back your strength the fitter you'll be to bear it, you know, and give me help worth the having.'

No more passed between us upon the subject on that occasion, and presently I bade Buckmaster 'Good-night' at my Guilford Street door. A minute later his cab had driven out of sight.

That drive with Max Buckmaster, his masterful and no less mysterious attitude, certainly roused within me an energy and mental force such as I had not known since those days before I was stricken down with a debilitating fever aboard ship. I paced my room with a firmer and more resolute tread; my moral courage seemed of a sudden restored; and I felt that the time had arrived for Gwennie to know all.

My passion for her, the selfish dread lest I should jeopardise any remote hope I had dared

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to entertain of winning this girl, must be thrust aside. My mind was at last thoroughly made up. She should know everything—everything that it was in my power to make known—before the night was out, and then—then—

It may be that on now hearing Gwennie's step upon the stairs my good resolve did, for one perilous instant, desert me; but a moment later, when the sound of her well-known tap fell on my ear, the strength of will came back to me; I became possessed by a feverish desire to speak, and I sprang towards the door to open it and invite her in.

I had not lighted my reading-lamp, but had been pacing about by the uncertain light of a flickering fire. Gwennie had a small crystal lamp in one hand and a large key in the other. She placed them both on the table, and then, turning to me with a smile, she said:

'With Clixby's compliments. She has asked me to give them to you.'

Smiling responsively, I said, 'What masonic signs are these?'

'This key,' she answered, laying her pretty finger for a second upon it, 'opens the door to my dear old uncle's rooms. The lamp, of course, is to light you there.'

'Ah! you have found a duplicate key,' I said. 'But must I look over the rooms alone?'

'Oh no,' said she; 'if I may come and'—

'If you may?'

'I thought, perhaps,' said she hesitatingly, 'that you might wish—might have some motive for wishing to look through the rooms by yourself.'

'I have no such wish. But before we set foot together inside Mr Pepworth's rooms,' said I—'before we speak again of the worthy man who when dying sent me to you—let me entreat you to share with me a burden that I can bear no longer alone.'

'What is it?' said she, speaking scarcely above a whisper. 'Pray don't hesitate to speak. I will listen patiently.'

She sank into a seat beside my fire; and thus encouraged by her kindly look and attitude, I drew a chair to her side, and then, as it had all happened to me, from the moment of my sad leave-taking with Simon Pepworth to the moment of parting with Buckmaster an hour ago, I told my story from first to last.

Gwennie listened patiently indeed; and when I had ended—when I had unburdened my mind of all its weight of anxiety concerning the diamonds, and had expressed my fear that they never would be found—she remained silent for a while, lost in thought.

'So that was the problem,' she said at last, 'you were trying to solve when I first saw you, from Mr Whit Smith's window, walking up and down the courtyard in Clifford's Inn?'

'Yes, that was the problem,' said I; 'those diamonds and—and you.'

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For a moment she became once more thoughtful. Then she said, 'I will talk to Mr Whit Smith. May I—may I tell him everything—just as you have confided everything to me?'

'Yes, Gwennie; I'm in your hands now,' said I. 'Do what seems to you best.'

She rose and took from my table the key and the lamp.

'Shall we go there now?'

I assented, and followed her across the hall. She handed me the key, and I opened the door. She passed in and stood in the centre of the room with the lamp raised on a level with her shapely head, so that I could see the rooms more distinctly.

The Pepworth apartments consisted of two rooms. The front room in which we were standing, panelled in oak, was furnished as a study, with book-shelves and cupboards. A massive desk stood under the window that looked out upon Guilford Street. This room was connected by folding-doors with a large bedroom. The furniture was old-fashioned, like most of the furniture in this cosy old mansion. The window in the bedroom was a double-sashed casement, reaching from floor almost to ceiling, that led out into a neglected garden at the back.

While I still stood looking around me, the identical sensation which I had experienced when pacing disconsolately to and fro in the old Inn, the weird sensation of having something almost within mental grasp which I associated with these rooms, but which my clouded brain could not completely lay hold upon, began to trouble me. I pressed my hands to my head, for again I became conscious of the big vibrating screw in my throbbing ear.

'John—Mr Sherwood—are you ill?'

She hurried to my side, and with her help I staggered towards a chair and sank down.

'No, not ill. I am well—quite well, Gwennie,' I cried. 'I remember all now—everything.'

'Not,' said she, bending down to scrutinise my face—'not where the diamonds are hidden?'

'Yes!'

'Where?'

Her dark eyes brightened; a vision of the diamonds seemed to flash from them as she rose, the lamp poised in her hand.

CHAPTER IV.

CONCLUSION.



YES, I remembered all. As I stood there staring round the old rooms, with the girl whom I loved waiting with keen expectation for me to speak, my recollection of the Pepworth document came back to me in its graphic detail, almost word for word. I found, in a sort

of mental glance through the pages of manuscript, that I had so far carried out my friend's instructions. I had sought out Mr Whitsmith at Clifford's Inn in order to report my arrival in London; I had paid my visit—through Mr Whitsmith's inspiration, it was true—to Gwennie Pepworth at Guilford Street; and then—

'Gwennie,' said I, rising and throwing a hasty look round, 'these are the rooms, as I now recall them, that I was told by Mr Pepworth to settle down in; and then, with you as my witness, I was to bring forth the box of diamonds from its dark receptacle into the light. Those were his words.'

'But where?'

'Come this way. And—quick!—bring the lamp.'

Trembling with excitement and expectancy, I hastened into the inner room. I felt no sense of doubt or mental confusion now. I stopped near the window and looked round at the girl.

'Is the door shut?'

'Yes,' she said.

'And the front-room window,' said I—'are the curtains drawn well over it?'

'Yes; no one can look in,' she said.

'But these shutters must be closed,' said I, pointing to the back window; 'you will soon see why.'

When we had done this—had raised the iron bar and fastened the clasp—I said, 'This is the side.'

I took the lamp out of Gwennie's hand, and holding it close to a recess in which the shutter on the left-hand side had rested, ran the light up and down, examining every crack and crevice.

'Ah!' said I at last, 'that's it.'

I handed her back the lamp, and taking a penknife from my pocket, stabbed a specified point in the panel, and without difficulty extracted from it a circular piece of wood resembling the bung of a small beer-cask. At the back of the hole thus exposed—a hole about half-an-inch deep—there could be seen a little brass ring. Into this ring I now inserted my forefinger, gave a vigorous pull, and a small door opened downwards until it formed a tiny shelf, revealing a deep and dark cupboard not more than two or three feet square.

'The lamp—nearer, please!'

Gwennie placed it upon the little shelf, and I eagerly peered into this cupboard. Every corner was lighted up.

There was nothing there.

'It's gone!'

We stood staring blankly into each other's faces. At last I spoke.

'No one can doubt now,' I said, 'why Edward Gedge, the second-mate aboard the *La Plata*, engaged these rooms! The document he picked up in my cabin told him all. It's he—he who has learnt the secret—has stolen those diamonds, and'—

At this moment there came a double knock at the front door, which caused me to pause. I readjusted the woodwork in the recess exactly as I had found it, and then followed Gwennie out into the hall.

The servant put a telegram into my hand. I tore it open and read as follows:

'Come without delay.—BUCKMASTER.'

I showed it to Gwennie. As she returned it she gave me a glance such as I can never forget. It inspired me with the confidence and courage of which I was so deeply in need; and then bidding her 'Good-night,' I hurried out.

It was getting late when the cab put me down at Buckmaster's door; but I noticed that the jeweller's shop was still open, still ablaze with its electric lamps that set the gems in the window sparkling enticingly. I was shown upstairs to Buckmaster's study by the man who had led the way there on the night upon which I set foot in London, now weeks ago; and I found my friend the detective seated just as I had found him on that occasion, his room lit up solely by the glare of the light outside.

'Well?'

If Buckmaster's style of greeting had irritated me at our last meeting some hours ago, his keenness and coolness of manner now irritated me still more.

'I thought,' said I, 'that you had news for me. Your telegram expresses urgency, and'—

'That's true. But,' he interposed, 'let me first of all hear your news. I can see from your face that you've something to tell me. What is it?'

I lost no time in recounting what had occurred—my visit to Pepworth's rooms, and how, in a sudden return of memory, I had had my dread confirmed that the diamonds had been spirited away by the villainous second-mate.

'You mean Edward Gedge—don't you?'

'Yes; whom else should I mean?'

Buckmaster ignored my show of temper, and rising from his chair, said, 'Come along, my boy!'

He crossed towards the door, and then paused with his hand upon it.

'So you've recovered your memory—have you?' said he. 'Let me congratulate you.'

Was he laughing at me? I looked at him with another flash of anger; but quickly mastering my irritability, I said, 'Thank you. But I don't think there's much to congratulate me about—at present. I greatly fear that I've got my memory back when it's too late to save'—

'That,' Buckmaster interposed, 'remains to be proved. Stop a minute! Have you been able yet, by-the-by, to recall to mind the face of that fellow-passenger—I mean the man who shared your cabin aboard the *La Plata*, and slept in the starboard berth?'

'Wildreck? No, not yet.'

'An! But suppose that you and Wildreck

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were suddenly brought face to face, do you think you would still fail to identify him?'

'Still I cannot say.'

'Well, follow me. But,' said Buckmaster in a low, impressive voice, 'whatever you do, if that chance of recognition should be given you—whatever happens, don't utter a sound.'

He now led the way downstairs and along a dimly-lit passage, and then pausing with his forefinger to his lips, opened a swing-door. We now stepped into a large, brightly-lighted room, like a store-room, with shelves against the walls that reached to the ceiling. These shelves were filled with packages of all sizes and shapes, and a ticket was attached to each packet. At the farther end of this room was another door, and in its upper panel was a small pane of glass.

'Look through there,' said Buckmaster, suddenly extinguishing the light.

I peered through the window, and what I saw was a pawnbroker's inner office or counting-house, and directly facing my coign of vantage were some half-dozen *clientèle* boxes or 'stalls,' each with a counter in front and a swing-door at the back. In one of these was a buxom woman, who fairly filled the place allotted, carrying on an animated discussion with one of the clerks; and in another box was a typical costermonger negotiating a loan upon a gorgeous parti-coloured silk neckerchief.

'Well,' whispered Buckmaster, 'do you see any one you recognise?'

'No.'

'Wait,' said he, holding his watch close to the window-pane. 'You'll not have to wait long now.'

While Buckmaster still spoke a flashily-dressed man appeared in one of the vacant boxes. A clerk stepped forward, and the man handed him a diminutive leathern case. The clerk opened it and held up to the light between his finger and thumb a big diamond.

But I hardly took note of this; for the customer's face had riveted my attention, and a cry would have certainly escaped me had not the grip of Buckmaster's fingers upon my wrist brought me to my senses.

'Quick!—whisper—who is it?'

'Wildreck!'

'Sure?'

'Yes, it's he. Those are the piercing black eyes that he opened on me in his sleep when lying in the starboard berth.'

A moment later, as it seemed to me—though for all I knew an hour may have passed—I found myself once more seated at Buckmaster's side in a swift-going cab, speeding along through the London streets.

'Come, my boy—come!' said Buckmaster, rousing me out of my abstraction by a sharp blow on the arm; 'collect your wits, for if you keep your head cool we shall settle this affair to-night.'

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'But why didn't you arrest him there and then?'

'He's all right—*shadowed*, you know,' said Buckmaster. 'It's the diamonds I'm thinking about.'

We had by this time reached one of the outlying northern suburbs, on the borders of a great heath. Here we alighted, and my friend dismissed the cab.

For a while we walked in silence over the dark heath. At last Buckmaster said, 'So you thought that Gedge was the culprit—did you?'

'Yes; I naturally concluded'—

'Ah! Now, I wonder,' said he, 'whether you begin to suspect what did happen?'

'No; I can only suspect,' said I, 'that Gedge and Wildreck went into partnership over this business, and'—

'There you're wrong. Gedge hadn't any hand in this affair.'

'No! Who, then, was Mrs Clixby's lodger?'

'At Guilford Street? Why, Wildreck, of course! He simply, in order to turn us off the scent, took the name of Edward Gedge. The second-mate's an honest man. I've found out that. The Pepworth document was already gone when Gedge entered your cabin.'

I expressed a keen desire to be told more, but Buckmaster said hurriedly, 'Not now. I can tell you nothing more to-night. What we've now got to do is to recover those diamonds.'

'To-night?'

'Yes,' said Buckmaster, speaking scarcely above a whisper—'recover them to-night, if my plan succeeds.'

'What plan?' cried I excitedly, for the spirit of adventure which I had acquired in Brazil was coming back.

'In the first place,' said he, 'where do you think the diamonds are now?'

'I can't imagine,' I replied.

'Under our very feet,' he said.

It had grown intensely dark out on this gusty heath; but Buckmaster had provided himself with a lantern, and he now produced it from his pocket, casting a ray of light upon the spot where we stood.

'Yes,' he went on, 'about twenty feet below. But bend down and put your ear to the ground. You'll not fail to understand what I mean.'

I obeyed; and after listening for a while a dull vibration fell upon my senses, and I fully realised the meaning of Buckmaster's words.

'Surely not there?'

'Yes; there, sure enough.'

'Where's the entrance?'

'Not five minutes' walk from here,' said Buckmaster. 'Follow me.'

In less than five minutes, after descending a somewhat steep bank, we paused beside a railway at the point where it vanished into a wide tunnel.

'Now, my boy, as a mining engineer of vast experience,' said Buckmaster, 'you will hardly

need much instruction. In fact, I can explain myself in two words. You will find lamps in the brackets placed alternately on the "up" and "down" sides against the brickwork of the tunnel. Just beyond the seventh lamp, and almost in a parallel line with it, you will discover the mark of an arrow on a brick. Remove the seventh brick below the arrow. Take this jack-knife and my lantern. You'll find the dead man's diamonds behind that brick.'

I waited for no further word, but stepped into the tunnel, leaving Buckmaster on guard at the entrance.

Groping my way through the semi-darkness, with the hollow echo of my footsteps breaking the grim silence in this damp-smelling place, I had no dread or presentiment of danger ahead. The thought of Gwennie—the thought that the chance had come to me in which to restore her fortune—put all the hopefulness and pluck into my heart that I could well desire. Besides, it was part of my calling to feel at home in underground ways and byways; and although I had been impelled to come here for the special purpose of recovering, if the thing were possible, Gwennie Pepworth's fortune, I was resolved not to let that fact lead me into undue haste. I did not fail to bear in mind that coolness in this business would prove my surest safeguard. While advancing with cautious tread, counting the lamps as I went along, I fancied that I heard a stifled cry behind me, and stopped to peer round and listen; but hearing no further sound, I continued to advance, and presently reached the seventh lamp, where I lighted upon the arrow-branded brick just beyond.

I put the lantern upon a sleeper, so that the light was thrown upon the bricks underneath, and then opening the jack-knife, I inserted the edge of the blade into a crevice on one side of the seventh brick below the arrow. It moved almost at the first touch, and with a little more skilful scooping I was rewarded by seeing the brick tumble out.

Then, as it fell, another sound less pleasing struck upon my ear. It was the muffled shriek from an engine. Again I listened, until I had assured myself that the train was on the down-line, and therefore, I being stationed on the up-line, would not interfere with my exploration. I now plunged my hand into the aperture and pulled out the first thing my fingers touched. In size and shape this thing oddly resembled the displaced brick, but upon closer examination I perceived that it was an iron box painted red, with no lock on either side. I dropped it into my pocket, confident that this must be the thing of which I was in quest, and then, lifting the lantern from the sleeper, started to find my way back to my friend's side. Now, as I turned with an irrepressible laugh of exultation on my lips, I observed a dark figure hurrying towards

me along the up-line. I levelled the light from my lantern full upon him, expecting to see the face of Buckmaster, and was struck with abject amazement when I found that it was my fellow-passenger Wildreck who confronted me. Before I had time for self-defence the lamp was knocked out of my hand and I was wrestling fiercely with the man—wrestling for my very life; for at this moment the train I had heard shrieking on its way into the tunnel came ominously in sight, and I felt sure that Wildreck's deadly intent was to throw me under it. It was a moment of inexpressible horror, more inexpressible than any nightmare through which I had ever passed. I saw a reflected glare of flame expanding in the darkness, with two red and widening bull's-eyes in advance, as the snorting engine came rushing towards us. Of a sudden Wildreck lost his footing and pitched me head-foremost against an iron rail, when all sense of sight and hearing rapidly ebbed away.

When I awoke to consciousness, the light of a dim lamp was the first thing to attract my attention. My adventure in the tunnel came crowding back upon me; for a brief, agonising moment, which an acute pain in my head helped to intensify, I imagined that I was still lying on the up-line, that the lamp was Buckmaster's, and that the figure moving towards me in the semi-darkness was that of 'the man in the star-board berth.' I uttered a low cry, raised myself upon my elbow, and peered more keenly round. No, thank heaven! I was no longer there. The lamp was resting upon a low table, and feebly lighting up the Pepworth apartments; and the figure now nearing my bedside was one I loved.

'Gwennie!' I murmured.

She made no answer; but I felt her tender arm about me as she raised me upon my pillows, while she held some cooling drink to my lips. Presently I fell into a sound, dreamless sleep; and when I awoke the room was lit with subdued daylight, and Gwennie was no longer there.

Days went by. I was slowly recovering from the injury caused by the stunning effects of my fall. Mrs Clixby had taken Gwennie's place as attendant upon me. But one day, while resting in my chair by the fireside, I said, 'Is Miss Pepworth upstairs? I fancy I can hear her step.'

'Why, yes. Would you like to see her? I'll send her to you, sir,' said the landlady, 'for you do seem well enough for a bit o' talk with her at last.'

When she came in, looking more bright and more beautiful than ever, I hastened to express my gratitude for all the care with which I knew she had tended me.

'I have only done what any one would have done for so true a friend,' she said. 'Do you think I can ever forget the anxiety and danger you have undergone for my sake? I would rather—a hundred times rather—that the diamonds had been lost than—than—'

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'Gwennie! are they recovered?' I cried. 'You must know that I love you—have loved you ever since I saw you in the twilight in Clifford's Inn; but I can never, never dare hope to win even your respect until the stolen diamonds have been restored.'

'Why, John, hasn't Mrs Clixby told you,' said she, 'all that happened after you were thrown down upon the rail?'

'No! What did happen, dear?'

'I'll tell you,' said Gwennie, 'for Mr Buckmaster, who has been here repeatedly to inquire after you, told me every detail days ago.'

She then went on to relate how the detective, when fully satisfied that the second-mate had had no hand in the affair, had fixed upon Wildreck as the most likely culprit. He had then put every wheel in motion, and had presently come upon the man employed as a navvy among a small gang on a northern railway. He had then set a watch upon him night and day, and had ultimately learnt every necessary fact concerning him. This unprincipled adventurer, when putting off his workman's disguise, had occupied handsome apartments in the West End, and here he had represented himself, under the name of Armstrong, as an Australian miner who had amassed great wealth. His arrest had been arranged to take place on the very night when he was identified in the pawnbroker's office, and at the moment when he had matured his plans for a journey into the country where his arrest would be almost impossible.

'Strangely enough,' Gwennie concluded, 'he might have escaped but for the fate that overtook him.'

'What fate?'

'In some cunning way he managed to escape the vigilance of the police, followed you and

Mr Buckmaster, struck your friend down at the entrance to the tunnel, and might possibly have got off with the diamonds had he not been killed by a passing train.'

'Killed!'

'Yes; and you narrowly escaped the same fate. Mr Buckmaster was only for a moment stunned by Wildreck's blow, and fortunately was able to go to your aid.'

For a while I was silent, lost in thought over all the strange events that had been crowded into the last few weeks of my life. At last I said, 'But the diamonds? Where are they?'

Gwennie raised her finger warningly. The night had closed in; the curtains had been drawn and the shutters closed in my inner room. The crystal lamp stood at hand, and the girl now took it up.

'Come this way, John,' said she; 'I want your help.'

'What is it?' said I, rising and gazing intently into her face.

'Look into the dark receptacle once more,' she said; 'you will find an answer there.'

I hastened to obey, while Gwennie, as she had done before, held the lamp; and there, in that secret recess, was the brick-coloured box, with the lid wide open, exhibiting to my gratified eyes the dead man's diamonds—at last.

A year went quickly away. I made a voyage to the Brazils, where, owing to some fortunate mining operations, I found myself possessed of considerable wealth. Upon my return to England at the year's end Gwennie became my wife. Our home, known as Pepworth Hall, lies among the Derbyshire hills; and it is here, in my quiet study, that I have just penned this leading episode in my life.

BALLADE: ON HIS LADY SPEAKING OR SINGING.

THERE is a music that doth trance the ear
And in the porches of the body clings,
Whereby the prisoned soul through sense may
hear

Some cadence caught from heavenly chorusing:
My soul needs no such ministers; she flings
Her cumbersome robes aside, and all unfurled
Leaps up to listen when one speaks or sings
Who owns the sweetest voice in all the world.

Music can make the spirit's vision clear,
And train her through sonorous imagings
To light upon some antenatal sphere
Or brood on callow Time with prescient wings.
My spirit out of space and time upsprings,
And, hovering at God's open gates empearled,
Listens and learns unutterable things,
Hearing the sweetest voice in all the world.

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Music to men is Death's dim pioneer,
And many a mystic ambassage it brings
Of dubious hope or sadness, joy or fear,
From that high choir where Cicely's censer
swings.
My music knows no vague interpretations,
No hinted bliss, nor cloudy menace hurled;
Only the clear refrain, 'I love you,' rings
Under the sweetest voice in all the world.

L'ENVOI.

Lady, around thy brows the King of kings
His earthly coronal of song hath curled
To have thee sing in Heaven, whose thousand
strings
Wait for the sweetest voice in all the world.

T. H. PASSMORE.

A JUNGLE COURTSHIP.

By E. D. CUMING.

I.



THE elder brother has never yet told how it comes that he has returned to the village,' said Mah Khet.

'He will tell if the little sister wishes to hear,' replied Moun Ban after a moment's hesitation.

'She does not wish to know if he does not wish to tell,' said Mah Khet.

They were not brother and sister, these two; they merely used that accommodating form of address, which is always polite, and may be affectionate. He was only a policeman, and a policeman in disgrace at that; she was the daughter of Ko Thaw, the rich timber-merchant and head-man of Panaday village. Moun Ban admired Mah Khet, and for that reason we find him squatting under her father's house paying his addresses through a hole in the floor.

In the more westerly and northern parts of Burma they manage these things better. In Rangoon or Mandalay, for instance, when you want to pay a visit to 'her' you go to her parents' house with some obliging friend at 'young man's time,' which is just after dark. The friend sits at one end of the veranda, while you and the lady occupy the other; and papa and mamma keep scrupulously out of sight and hearing. This arrangement has obvious advantages. In Tenasserim, the province in which Panaday is situated, immemorial usage prescribes a different method of courting. There, as elsewhere, the houses are built on piles, the floor being six feet or more clear of the ground; and in every house, if you look in the corners, you will find a hole about six inches square in the floor. It is an extraordinary thing that you never meet a woman who knows what that hole was originally made for; some even live in a house for years and have never even noticed it till you point it out! Yet, if at 'young man's time' you step quietly underneath the house and cough, you will hear light footsteps overhead, and that hole will be darkened by the face of the daughter of the house, who will say, 'The elder brother is already come,' or something of that sort. This kind of keyhole courtship no doubt has advantages, but young men accustomed to the other method say it is liable to cause crick in the neck.

Moun Ban, however, did not know that any other way of paying such a visit existed. He squatted blissfully on the ground in the dark,

his back against a post, and his eyes fixed on the spot where he knew the hole framed Mah Khet's face. He had been there nearly an hour, and had not got crick in the neck yet. Practice is everything.

'I will tell,' he said; 'but I thought everybody knew.' Then he became aware by her movements that Mah Khet was making herself comfortable to listen.

'Well, then, the black foreign policemen, having caught the dacoit chief Nga Galay, with four of his men, brought them bound with ropes to the station at Mopoon, saying to us of the guard, "Keep these men safe till such time as His Honour the Superintendent shall order." This was at the hour when the evening star rises; and we, mindful of the great magic of Nga Galay, locked him and his men, bound, in the cage. In the second watch of the night came His Honour Ton Sen Thekin, the Superintendent. He gave praise to the black foreign police; but to us he spoke hard words, because it had seemed good to us to leave the dacoits tightly bound. He said to us, "Loose the ropes; their skin is cut." The sergeant made answer, "Lord, the powers of this dacoit are great; with the finger he breaks iron bars, and his strength is as the strength of nine elephants." To this Ton Sen Thekin replied that the sergeant's mouth was full of fool's words; and he stood while we loosed the arms of the prisoners and locked them again in the cage. In the morning when we awakened the dacoits were gone, two strong iron bars having been broken from the mortar. Thus were the sergeant's words made good. Yet upon this account he was dismissed, and those of us who had red stripes on the sleeve for merit lost them, and were sent to jungle villages.'

'Is the elder brother sorry?' asked Mah Khet after a pause.

'No.'

'Does he not wish to return to Mopoon, near the city?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'The little sister knows.'

The little sister conjectured that Moun Ban was glad to be sent back to Panaday, because that was his native village; and when she was furnished with the true reason, naturally refused to believe it. She added that her father was very sorry that Moun Ban had incurred the displeasure of the Government; her father thought so much about official rank, and was

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afraid that in Panaday Moun Ban would have no chance to recover his good-conduct stripes.

'Does he think ill of me?' inquired Moun Ban anxiously. Under ordinary circumstances a policeman does not trouble himself about the opinion his neighbours entertain of him; but Ko Thaw was no common village chief: the Deputy Commissioner himself, when he visited Panaday, had told the people that their headman was much respected by the Government. It was on Ko Thaw's good word that Moun Ban had been first enlisted in the police; his good word might recover those stripes that had been taken off his uniform coat, and—he was Mah Khet's father. By the convenient fiction of Burmese social life, Mah Khet's father and mother did not know that Moun Ban came to see her at 'young man's time'—in fact, didn't know any one came, and would be immensely but politely surprised when he asked leave to become their son-in-law.

'He does not think ill of you,' said Mah Khet; 'but he would be very glad and happy, I think, if you regained the goodwill of the Government.'

'Even now it is rumoured that Nga Galay and his band are in this district,' remarked Moun Ban. 'There are a thousand rupees upon his head. If I could but shoot the dog's son!'

'Go and catch him,' said Mah Khet lightly.

Moun Ban laughed. But as he rose and stretched himself he sighed, for he knew well that honour and promotion would be the portion of him who did arrest the famous robber; and honour and promotion meant Ko Thaw's consent to his marriage with Mah Khet. Moun Ban had not sent to ask the old gentleman's permission yet, and did not intend to, because he knew Ko Thaw would say, 'I think they had better wait a little while. I fear Moun Ban's health is not very good;' and such an answer is hurtful to the dignity of a police officer.

Mah Khet having remarked that it was time to sleep, Moun Ban wished her good rest, and strolled away up the raised middle of the street to the *thannah*, whose wooden roof stood out clear-cut against the night sky.

They go to bed early in jungle villages, and there was nobody about; but as Moun Ban passed along, the murmur of voices drew his eyes to a house under which a pair of sturdy legs was just discernible in the gloom. Knowing well that the legs belonged to somebody on the same errand that had occupied his own evening, Moun Ban was about to go on, when memory of the Lord Superintendent's wiggling roused his sense of routine. 'Hoo-go-dah?' he demanded, coming to a halt. The proprietor of the legs answered 'Bachelor' in a diffident tone, and a smothered giggle greeted Moun Ban's parrot response to 'Pass, bachelor, an'-all-well.' The giggle annoyed Moun Ban, uncertain whether the English words, whose meaning he knew, were quite applicable to the case; and being annoyed, 1900.]

he made a point of challenging the owner of every pair of legs he saw—six in number—on his way along the street.

'You challenge often to-night,' remarked one of his comrades sleepily as he came up the steps of the police *thannah*, on whose floor the men had spread their mats.

'There is rumour that Nga Galay's gang is in this district,' replied Moun Ban; 'therefore, when I saw legs I challenged.'

The comrade chuckled, remarking that one knew where most young men's legs might be seen at this hour.

'The legs of a thief are not more white nor more brown than the legs of an honest man,' said Moun Ban, a little sulkily, as he took off his belt and unrolled his sleeping-mat.

'You speak well,' struck in the voice of Pho Gye, the head-constable. 'Your words are the words of a wise man. It is well to challenge all, for a thief may lurk in the guise of a lover, the house-owner thinking no evil.'

'Not much fear of that in Panaday,' said the first speaker, yawning.

'Nevertheless, let all persons whose faces are not seen be challenged henceforth after dark,' said the head-constable; and Moun Ban lay down to sleep feeling that he had already taken one step towards Mah Khet.

The policemen made a little fun at their senior's expense next morning, asking if he would not issue an order that young men who went courting should whiten their legs with chalk so that all might know what they were doing; but before the sun was high the scoffers were silenced, and their tone towards the head-constable and Moun Ban became very respectful. The change was brought about by the arrival of a messenger on a swift elephant. He came from the Assistant Superintendent of Police at Shway-geen, who wrote that information had been received proving Nga Galay and his gang were in the neighbourhood of Panaday. Parties were being sent out to scour the jungles, and meanwhile the police at Panaday must keep a careful lookout for suspicious characters, and never for an hour leave the *thannah*, with the rifles it contained, unguarded. Nga Galay had no firearms, and it was known that he was making every effort to obtain them.

Pho Gye read this letter aloud to his men and to the village people whom the arrival of the elephant had drawn to the *thannah*. When he finished and looked over his spectacles at Moun Ban to say gravely, 'You did well last night, brother,' nobody even smiled.

'With leave,' said Moun Ban, feeling the necessity to maintain his rebudding reputation for zeal, 'I would say that it were well to send our rifles and cartridges in to Shway-geen upon the elephant; otherwise the dacoits may steal them.'

Most of his hearers murmured approval; but

the head-constable, digging his thumb-nail into the floor uneasily, demurred. He quite agreed that Mounge Ban's thought was wise; the Government were afraid lest Nga Galay should steal rifles, and any child could see that the weapons would be safer in the barrack at headquarters than they were in the rack just behind them. At the same time, he feared that his honour would send back the rifles, asking, 'Can the Panaday police kill dacoits like mosquitoes with slaps of the hand?'

'That is very true,' murmured the people, and their tone was that of sages heralding a new and curious discovery; 'that is certainly true.'

'I shall go and take the advice of Ko Thaw,' said the head-constable.

'Here comes Ko Thaw!' exclaimed Mounge Ban. 'He comes to the *thannah*, and carries a paper.'

Ko Thaw had also received a letter by the elephant-messenger. It came from the clerk to the Assistant Superintendent, and was heard with profound attention as Ko Thaw read it aloud, squatting at the top of the *thannah* stairs.

'Advise you to send in any money you have by the elephant!' exclaimed the head-constable.

'Surely the dacoits must be very close at hand.'

'They may be,' said Ko Thaw, folding the letter. 'I have four thousand rupees in the new iron box, but I shan't send them in.'

'The new iron box!' murmured the people admiringly. 'Where could money be safer than in the new iron box?'

It had been the pride of the village since it arrived from Moulmein six months ago, and was landed from the boat slung to a beam on the shoulders of about four times the number of men required. No stranger of consideration was suffered to leave Panaday without being shown the marvels of the box in Ko Thaw's sleeping-room. Visitors, having tapped the beam which shored up the floor under it, and invoked their mothers over the prolonged ceremony of stud-turning and pressing which presaged opening the safe, were, if they appeared insufficiently impressed, invited to lift it. Once a muscular sceptic did tilt up one side of it; that a crushed great toe and a month's lameness was the penalty only enhanced the virtues of the iron box, being accounted a judgment upon the impious.

'Any neighbour fearing lest dacoits come should bring his rupees to be locked in the box,' said Ko Thaw; 'but for my part I do not think they will attack this village.'

'I wish we could put the rifles in it,' sighed Mounge Ban; 'but they are a man's length, and the box is only two spans of the hand each way.'

Ko Thaw was entirely of the head-constable's opinion that the Superintendent would be angry if they sent the rifles in to headquarters for safety; so when the elephant-men started home-

wards in the early afternoon they went empty-handed.

Though the people went about their usual vocations that day, the news wrought a feeling of unrest, more by the manner of its coming than by its substance. Warning to keep watch for suspicious characters had often been received before, but by boat-messengers, who took a day and a half to come by the winding creeks from Shway-geen. The authorities would not have sent warning by *koonkie* or fast elephant, which came by the hill paths through jungle in six hours, if the matter had not been thought urgent; and before the shadows began to lengthen, Ko Thaw's box was stuffed full of bags of rupees and gold ornaments.

'Nine thousand two hundred and two rupees,' announced the head-man after crushing in the last bag and locking the safe. 'If the dacoits come we shall leave a message to say, "If you can carry this away you may keep it."'

The assembled neighbours echoed, 'Yes, certainly they may keep it;' but Mah That, a bleary-eyed old woman who had the knack of saying the right thing at the wrong time, cried, 'Suppose Nga Galay's men come quietly in the night and compel the head-man to open the box with the key?'

Ko Thaw's face lengthened visibly; that very possible contingency unfortunately had not occurred to him.

'If you had thought of that in time, mother,' he said, 'I would have sent the key in to Shway-geen by the elephant.'

'It is a pity,' said everybody; and they relieved their feelings by scowling at Mah That, who had not a *piece* in the safe—or out of it, for that matter.

Those neighbours for whose money it had been impossible to find space in the box said there was always a weak point about a new-fangled notion like that, and occupied the waning daylight in digging holes to bury their property; and by sunset all were prepared for the dacoits—that is to say, had made up packets of cooked rice in leaves to take with them when the first alarm bade them go and hide in the jungle.

The night passed quietly. Two or three times the village was startled for a moment by the challenge of the policeman on patrol, stern to ferocity because he knew whom he was challenging; but when the sun rose, the men and women who sauntered to the bank of the creek to sit and gossip in the shade of the great bamboo clump had so far recovered themselves that when the head-constable appeared carrying his blue coat over his shoulder they could greet him with laughing cries of 'Hoo-go-dah?'

'A policeman who wants a chew of betel,' replied Pho Gyee pleasantly. 'Has any one passed down this morning?' he asked, helping himself from one of the betel-boxes offered.

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'One little boatload of grain,' answered a young man, yawning; 'it was going to Shway-geen, and gave no news.'

'I don't believe there's any news to give,' drawled another.

'The letter said the dacoits were reported to be somewhere up the river,' remarked Pho Gyee.

'Well, if a boat comes down the river, and the men say there's no news, one may say the letter was wrong.'

'There is not a village within a day's journey worth attacking,' said Ko Thaw; 'so, if Nga Galay were near, he would have attacked us. I do not believe he is near. Who is going in for a swim?'

The men were still splashing and laughing in the shallows when some one called from the bank that another boat was coming down, and all turned to look.

'It is a pot-seller's boat,' said the head-constable, who had not bathed. 'It rides high on the water, and I can see the red earthenware.'

The rowers were pulling lazily, and, from the frequency with which they looked round towards Panaday, were evidently anxious to make an end of rowing and take rest.

'Whence do you come, neighbours?' cried two or three as the boat came near and the men rested on their oars. 'From Waydaw village? Well, that is far. Come and eat rice with us, and give news. Have you any word of Nga Galay?'

'Nga Galay?' echoed the steersman, releasing his grasp of the steering-paddle as the boat grounded. 'Nga Galay? Ah! the dacoit chief, you mean. No, neighbours, we have heard nothing of him.'

'We have news from Shway-geen that he is somewhere about here,' said Pho Gyee, 'and therefore asked for news.'

The steersman looked rather grave, and said he was sure that if his master had known that, they would not have travelled by night.

'Is the good owner of the boat not with you?' asked Ko Thaw.

'He sleeps,' replied the steersman. 'Having had much fever lately, he is weary, and is now asleep.'

The village men showed the new-comers where they could tie their boat, and repeated their invitation to come ashore and eat; it was quite time for morning rice, and when they had eaten and rested they could go on in the cool of the evening.

'After what you tell us,' said the steersman, wading through the shallow to the bank, 'I doubt whether Mounng Doon, the boat-owner, will wish to go on to Shway-geen. The creeks below this village being very narrow, the dacoits may attack us as we pass down.'

'There is rice and sleeping-room for friends in my village,' said Ko Thaw politely.

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'Also policemen to protect,' said the steersman, making a little obeisance to Pho Gyee, who had put on his coat to show his status. 'I think, however, that if we can buy here a few viss of salt we shall start back to Waydaw this afternoon.'

At this one of the rowers remarked pleasantly that his friend seemed to forget that Mounng Doon had taken a rupee each from five men to carry them to Shway-geen; those men might object to be taken back to the place they came from.

'Well, well, we shall hear the good boat-owner's words when he wakes,' said the steersman. 'Meantime I am hungry, and these friends of Panaday offer rice.'

The rowers and passengers were taken to the houses of different hosts; the steersman, whose name was Shway San, being the guest of Ko Thaw. He was a very polite young man, and the deference he showed quite won the heart of the head-man. The box, to which he was introduced after eating, interested him so much that it had to be unlocked and relocked half-a-dozen times. To Mah Khet and her mother he was so complimentary that the elder lady said shyly to her daughter afterwards that it was well Somebody Else had not been by to hear the pretty things Shway San said.

Somebody Else, having been on duty all night, had spent the morning in sleep; and as the sun was high when he awoke, and folks had lain down for the midday rest, he saw nothing of the visitors till the afternoon was advanced. They had bought the salt they wanted, but their departure was delayed owing to differences of opinion. Some of the men were afraid to go on because of dacoits, and others were afraid to go back for the same reason. Mounng Ban happened to come upon the party as they squatted on the bank discussing the matter, and was politely asked for his advice.

'Why not stay here?' said Mounng Ban. 'Wait until we receive certain news of the dacoits; then if they are reported up the river you can go down; if down, you can return.'

'I think the Government officer gives very sound advice,' said the steersman. 'We are safe here in a large village with twelve armed police.'

'No; six policemen only,' corrected Mounng Ban.

'Well, six policemen, who no doubt have very good swords'—

'Each has a rifle,' put in Mounng Ban.

'That is good—very good; six Government officers with rifles. Can we do better than stay?'

The others agreed that they could not do better; two of the advocates for moving on, indeed, said that had they known the police were so well armed they should never have suggested leaving.

'They are certainly some of the politest men I ever met,' said Mounng Ban that evening through the floor-hole to Mah Khet. 'The old mother Mah that received from them two large new earthen jars without payment.'

'Shway San wished to give me a silk neckerchief,' said Mah Khet, with a little simper.


'Oh!' Mounng Ban's tone was not one of gratification.

'Yes; but when he said, "I must give it through the hole," I bade him be silent. What would the elder brother do if he, passing by, saw another in the place where he now sits?'

'Pass by?' said Mounng Ban dryly.

'Who is that passing so slowly just now?' inquired Mah Khet, who could not see into the street for the mats which covered the veranda railing. She only spoke in mischief, wishing to make him jealous; but Mounng Ban turned his head to look, and by the bright moonlight he recognised—Nga Galay.

II.

HE pottery-merchant and his friends were gathered in conclave under the mat tunnel which covered in the after-part of their boat. The silence of the moonlit night was broken by the baying of pariah dogs in the village, but only a light in the distant police *thannah* hinted where men might be awake. Nevertheless, those in the boat talked in low tones lest any should hear them.

'We cannot rush the *thannah*,' said Nga Galay, otherwise Mounng Doon, boat-owner and seller of pots. 'I have seen; there is open ground about the place, and you heard the words of the old fool in spectacles.'

'The rifles are always kept loaded lest his lordship and followers should come,' chuckled Shway San. 'His lordship speaks well; we cannot rush the place.'

'We might creep up softly and take the guns while the policemen sleep,' said a voice respectfully—'if his lordship approved.'

'His lordship does not approve,' snapped Nga Galay, whose temper was a little ruffled from confinement to the boat. Knowing that description of his person had been circulated, and a large reward offered for his head, whether upon his shoulders or off, he felt pardonable diffidence about showing himself in daylight. Partly from bravado, and partly from sheer restlessness, he had walked through the village after nightfall, and returned to his boat happily unconscious that he had been seen by the only man in the place who could recognise him without the aid of the word-picture the police authorities had drawn with such irritating exactitude. Years ago when he got into trouble they had forced

him to stand up stripped while clerks wrote in a great book every tattoo-mark and mole on his body from neck to heel; Nga Galay had neither forgotten nor forgiven it.

'We cannot get the rifles,' said the chief after thought; 'and if we try to take the key of his box from the head-man the police will shoot us. The box is too heavy to carry, even if there were none to fight; and'—to Shway San—'from what you say, it cannot be broken open.'

'Its strength is beyond the magic of the most illustrious of leaders,' sighed Shway San, 'being of iron thick as a man's thigh, in the manner of those English money-boxes.'

Shway San exaggerated, and he knew it; but discretion recommends overstatement when you rate a thing superior to the magical powers of your chief.

'I know the kind of box,' said Nga Galay; 'I have seen one.' He might have added, 'in the jail at Moulmein,' but did not.

He relapsed into thought once more, and the men sat silent, listening to the whisper of the wavelets as the boat swung to the current.

'There is but one way of obtaining this money,' said Nga Galay at last. 'We must seize the head-man's wife and hold her for ransom.'

'Most luminous wisdom!' said all the men in a breath.

'With his lordship's gracious leave,' said Shway San, 'his lordship has not seen the woman, wife of the head-man. To the eye of his servant she is not comely; she is elderly, very fat, and, by the testimony of her neighbours, a scold.'

'What is that in the jungle, where a kerchief and a stone will muzzle a scold?' asked the chief.

'His lordship's mouth is full of light and his way with scolds is short; but will any husband pay to recover a scold?'

'Ah! A sword of honour shall certainly be given into your hand,' said Nga Galay, with approval. 'Speak on.'

'I would say, with leave, that which his lordship would command did his knowledge of these jungle-village cattle approach the sum of his wisdom. This head-man has a daughter, a maid of great beauty, spare of figure, fair of skin, and having a voice like—like—like'—He paused as if at a loss for words. Shway San would have made his fortune anywhere as a courtier.

'The order, therefore,' said Nga Galay with decision, 'is that this girl be taken and held for ransom. How much is said to be in the box? Nine thousand rupees? Very good; that is the price of the wench. To my astute follower, Shway San, I entrust the honour of taking the girl without hurt and without disturbance.'

Shway San expressed his gratitude for this

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signal mark of confidence, and undertaking to place his leader in possession of Mah Khet before noon next day, sought his sleeping-mat to consider how he might fulfil the engagement.

If he had any doubts next morning, they were masked behind an air of diplomatic reserve. To the inquiries of his friends he made answer, 'Let the oars hang free; let one man sit in the bow cutting sticks for the pot; and when I beat the hands together, let him sever the rope that holds us to the bank, while the rest seize the oars and row very fast away. Now silence; you are peaceful traders still, divided whether we go up the river or down.'

For one to whom the capture of prisoners by stratagem was a novelty, Shway San certainly made a very creditable beginning. Many of the villagers being assembled as usual on the bank, he stood up and announced loudly that his master had ordered him to sell without reserve all this large and excellent stock of earthenware by auction, and he invited their good friends of Panaday to inspect the pots before they were put up for sale. One young man, shouting, 'I will buy some at a price,' waded to the boat's side and began to climb on board; but Shway San skilfully repelled him, saying it was unseemly that so fine a young woman should don her brother's clothes; let her go and put on her own skirt, and then he should be happy to see her. Whereupon the youth retired, laughing shamefacedly under the chaff of his friends; it is the woman's business to buy such things for the household.

'Only women are allowed to come and see the pots,' inquired Moungh Doon pleasantly.

'Women only, there being little space in the boat,' replied Shway San; 'and we particularly invite the young and pretty ones.'

Every one laughed at this, and the boat having been poled in and planks laid from the shore, the women, with much giggling and screaming, balanced themselves on their way on board. By breakfast-time nearly every woman in the village had examined the pots, and had marked those she meant to bid for; the man who sat cutting firewood in the bow had chopped every stick into matchwood, but Shway San had given him no signal to cut the rope. Mah Khet had not even appeared on the bank; and after he had sold a dozen jars, Shway San declared that much talking had made him hungry, and as the sun was now hot, the rest of the stock would be sold in the evening.

'Selling jars at half their value is a poor morning's work,' grumbled the chief when the villagers, in high good humour, had drifted away to eat their rice, accompanied by some of the visitors.

'His lordship forgets the trash cost us nothing to begin with,' grinned Shway San.

'My follower forgets that the son of a dog from whom I took the boat will have informed 1900.]

the police. Even now they may be after us,' retorted Nga Galay. 'We cannot dally here another day; it is not safe.'

'Your slave had hoped to lure the wench into his lordship's hands by this means,' said Shway San, rather crestfallen.

'I did not want a whole cargo of women prisoners,' said the chief.

'It was his slave's purpose,' said Shway San mildly, 'to at once throw overboard those his lordship did not want, that they might carry to the village the message, "Bring nine thousand rupees to the great tree two miles down the river at sunrise to-morrow, and receive the girl in exchange."'

'Well, having failed to decoy the woman by this plan, better try another,' replied the chief sharply.

Shway San thought over the problem while he ate his rice, and fell asleep afterwards considering it. When he awakened the shadows were already long, and a few old women were gathered on the bank waiting for him to continue the auction; new pots at half the bazaar price are not to be had every day.

'Ho, younger brother!' they shrilled as he rose and twisted up his hair, 'we wait. Sell and take our money.'

'I knew you would come,' cried Shway San, striking an attitude; 'trust the woman to know good earthenware when she sees it. Now, here—here is a jar so well made that it holds twice as much as any other jar the same size, and so sound that if you knocked the bottom out the water would remain in. Who says ten rupees for this pot? Well, ten annas?'

Very small jokes go a long way in a quiet jungle place; before three jars had changed hands the whole village had collected on the bank, and Shway San's heart beat as he saw Mah Khet and her mother escorted by the young constable who had asked in the morning if only women were allowed on board the boat. Pretending to think the bidding was slow, he stopped selling, and said that he was sure he saw before him some friends who had not inspected his goods. They must come and see them.

Seven or eight women, Mah Khet among them, rose and picked their way through the crowd to the water's edge. Shway San saw her come, and had to hide his delight by burlesquing the clown in the play when the princess smiles upon him; but just as Mah Khet was about to set foot on the plank, he saw a young policeman whisper to the girl's mother, who called her to come back. Shway San could have killed the meddlesome fellow, whom he thought was jealous. He did not see what Moungh Ban, keenly watchful since his discovery of last night, had seen—namely, a man with a knife in his hand creep along to the prow of the boat and squat by the rope which fastened it. Others

saw the act, but not knowing what Moun Ban knew, thought nothing of it.

Shway San got through his play-auction somehow, tossing the pots overside to the buyers, and forgetting to ask for the money as often as not, while the people laughed and inquired if he had nothing more to sell in the same way. After the last jar had been thrown over, an old woman shouted, 'Finished, brother! Now you have time to put on your best clothes for "young man's time;" she will be happy, the girl you court.' He had sold the old woman two pots for nothing, so she thought much of him. Shway San laughed to her, and went in to see the chief, for her words had given him a new plan.

'There is risk,' said Nga Galay when he had heard the scheme; 'but it is my pleasure to order that the men do as you say, save this: I myself will go beneath the house and speak in your name, while you, at my call, shall rush in and drag the girl to the boat.'

'With leave,' said Shway San, 'the girl knows my voice, and is, perhaps'—he sniggered respectfully—'well disposed towards your lordship's servant.'—'Better be outside the house than in, lest the police interfere,' thought Shway San.

'It is my pleasure to play the part of the lover,' said the chief, equally alive to its advantages.

Shway San gave way as a matter of course, and they proceeded to develop their plan. First of all the boat must be moored nearer Ko Thaw's house, which stood on the bank, with its back to the river. 'But that,' said the chief, 'must be done without arousing suspicion.'

'That is easy,' said his lieutenant. Stepping to the prow, he loosed the rope, immediately crying out to his companions that they had broken adrift. The men seized their oars at once; but Shway San could not find a suitable place to drop the anchor he had made ready till the boat lay just off the head-man's house, where the bank overhung the water, which had burrowed under, and ran deep.

'Better done in daylight than after the sky shuts,' he remarked as he rejoined the chief. 'We lie so close that the side nearly rubs against the bank.'

Nga Galay said Shway San should have a golden sword of honour, and resumed his instructions. Soon after dark he would step ashore under the house in whose shadow they lay, and having attracted Mah Khet's attention, would beg her to accept the silk kerchief Shway San had offered. When she put her hand through the hole to take the present Nga Galay would hold it and keep her prisoner until Shway San and three others, who must be in waiting at the bottom of the stairs, should rush up—

'Speak lower, your lordship! Remember we lie almost under the window of the sleeping-room.'

'Should rush up,' continued the chief, dropping his voice to a whisper, 'and carry her off to the boat, cut the anchor-rope, and row away.'

'I only hope there were none to hear my lord's words,' said Shway San, peering uneasily round the mat tunnel. 'One might flick a betel-nut into the open window there.'

'It is a pity you moved the boat at this time. Such haste was not needed,' replied Nga Galay.

'I have drawn scarce ten breaths since my lord declared the deed worthy of reward,' said Shway San sulkily.

A slight movement in the house close by checked any answer the chief might have had on his lips, and for a few minutes the two sat listening intently.

'It was only a dog,' said Shway San at last; 'the people sit gossiping in the street at this hour.'

He sprang on to the bank, and passing between the houses, disappeared. Nga Galay watched him go, and calling for writing materials, sat up to write the message which must be left in Ko Thaw's house, telling him where he should send the ransom.

'The success of an enterprise like this,' said his lordship graciously to the man who crouched before him holding the ink, 'depends on the care bestowed upon small details of arrangement. Give me yet another strip of palm-leaf whereon I may write the shares each shall receive of this nine thousand rupees.'

In a few minutes Shway San returned, looking radiant; he had walked up the village, and looking into the *thannah*, had seen not one policeman there. The rifles and bayonets were also missing from the rack; and on asking whither the constables had gone, a woman had told him there was news of Nga Galay's gang.

'Then without doubt they are now far off in the jungle,' said the chief, looking pleased, as well he might.

The sun had set now, and night was fast closing in. Nga Galay turned out his rush-work box and changed his clothes, putting on his best silk *pasoh*, clean white jacket, and new silk headkerchief. It was unlikely that any one would see him; but custom ordains that he who goes courting shall wear his best clothes, and the moon would give just enough light for Mah Khet to see that he was properly attired. Being dressed, he lit a cheroot and sat down to wait. Shway San and his party were ready, but they had merely to gird their *pasohs* tightly about the thighs.

All was prepared; the oars hung loose from the thwarts, and the rowers squatted by them in readiness to pull; in the bow, for the third time, crouched the man, knife in hand, ready to cut the anchor-rope. The chief threw his eye over the crew, signed to Shway San to take his men ashore, and followed them himself. The village was quiet save for the low murmur of

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voices. Nga Galay, as he stood under the hole which had been pointed out to him, glanced out over the street and saw the young men pass to vanish under one house and another. One coming by saw Nga Galay and threw him a laughing challenge; his answer was followed by movements on the floor above, and in another moment a sweet voice whispered through the floor-hole:

'Is the elder brother come?'

'The man of the boat from Waydaw, a humble seller of pots, who would ask acceptance of a trifling gift,' replied the chief.

'It is unseemly that I take gifts from strangers,' said Mah Khet.

'Only a silk neckerchief—a little pink kerchief of English silk?'

'It is tempting,' said Mah Khet; 'yet—yet'—

Nga Galay held up the kerchief that she might feel its texture if she would. He was a tall man, and his head nearly touched the joists of the floor; holding the silk with his left hand, he raised his right in readiness.

'I may hardly take it from a stranger, however courteous,' said Mah Khet; 'but perhaps if I found it in the morning on the stairs'—

'Might not another find it there?'

'That is true; that is quite true. Well, it may be passed through the hole, though I can't tell what my mother would say.'

Nga Galay saw it was useless to try and persuade her to reach down for the kerchief; he shook it open to cover his hand, and marking where her fingers clasped the edge of the hole, caught her wrist. She screamed, and so did Nga Galay, for other hands seized his and he was swung off his legs. Vaguely he heard the patter of naked feet up the stairs, while some one flew past him, and creaking told that the some one had jumped into the boat. He had no mind for this or the scuffle within; rough coir rope was wreathing about his arm, and he felt the loops close and pinch the skin ere he was drawn to the shoulder against the hole. There he hung, feeling for earth with his toes, while lights danced and the policemen he had thought so far away ran down the stairs to close round him with clinking handcuffs and more ropes.

'Show his face!' cried one; and Nga Galay blinked as the light streamed through the dingy sheets of cobweb.

They saw his face, and one constable, bawling his name, let out a roar of joy that brought the villagers running.

'Oho! oho! the trap for a jungle-cat catches the tiger himself! Come, see the tiger caught

in his own snare! See this dog's son who sought to carry off a maid for ransom!'

Nga Galay cursed them with all the curses he knew; but the worse his words the louder their jeers. The policemen put down their rifles to dance and sing with delight, while Nga Galay in their midst hung clawing at the ground like a fowl. They kept him writhing and kicking till every mother in Panaday had brought her child to see the chief whose head was worth a thousand rupees—a thousand rupees—a thousand rupees in silver! They sat round in eager debate whether it were wiser to shoot him there or take him chained to Shway-geen. They asked would he give nine thousand rupees to be let go, and where he thought his friends might be found to pay it. Only three of his friends lay bound upstairs, and the *thannah* cage, they said, had room for all. Before Nga Galay, his ankles linked with two pairs of handcuffs, and a rope knotted about his neck, sat on the ground glowering over his swelled arm, he had learned how Constable Moun Ban, formerly of Mopoon, had recognised him the night before; how the movements of his men had been watched; how, when the boat was moved, the police had assembled in Ko Thaw's house, and that same Moun Ban had listened while the plan to carry off Mah Khet was discussed; and how, not having heard all, the police had thought the arm they seized was Shway San's. But Shway San, a cautious wight, was now far away and safe, having sent his men upstairs to cover his own retreat.

There is little more to tell. When Nga Galay had been taken to Shway-geen, tried, and sentenced to transportation overseas, the Lord Superintendent commanded that Moun Ban come to his house, and there, before all the policemen and several English gentlemen, gave him three new red stripes to be sewn upon his sleeve, and conferred upon him the rank of sergeant. Then, being asked if he would like to return to Panaday, Moun Ban said, 'With your noble lordship's leave, yes,' and was bidden go back and take the place of old Pho Gyee, also promoted, and transferred to a new station.

Moun Ban, on his return, sent a friend (having neither father nor mother) to Ko Thaw with these words, 'I would marry my father's daughter; whereupon Ko Thaw sent answer, 'Let the young man, our son, the husband of our daughter, come and dwell in this house.'

And to this day his little sons, taught by their mother, point to the hole in the floor, saying, 'Through this our father drew promotion and honour, having sought love.'



HOW KELLY CAME TO BILLABONG.

By CARLTON DAWE.



At Billabong it had been a hot and very busy day; but every one perspired and was happy, for prices had ruled high. Billabong held a market of more or less importance every week; but at this momentous period of its existence the annual live-stock sale was in progress, when the gentry and others of the surrounding districts flocked into the little bush-township. Upon such occasions Billabong did itself well, and the one long, wide, straggling street invariably presented a singularly animated appearance. Ladies from adjacent stations, spruce young bushmen in the nattiest of riding-breeches, comfortable squatters from the 'far back,' drovers, herdsmen, townspeople—all jostled each other good-naturedly in Main Street. The annual cattle sale was a red-letter day in the annals of the district.

Money was plentiful, and was freely expended. The bushman loves a spree. In the dreary fastnesses of the back-country he leads a life which, were it not for the eager anticipation of the annual outburst, would be perfectly unendurable. As a consequence, restraint comes not into the reckoning, and he who has starved for a year begins the carouse with champagne. True, this quickly deteriorates into vile whisky and viler beer, and then to utter bankruptcy; but the bushman sheds no tear over spilt milk. He has eaten his cake, and it is well. Back he goes to the bush, and for the next twelve months works like a bullock in anticipation of another such bout.

By noon the principal lots had all been disposed of, for people began work early at Billabong so as to avoid the heat of the day; and between two and three o'clock Sergeant Wiggan and Constable Blayney, in the cool recesses of the police-station, sat down in their shirt-sleeves before a steaming boiled leg of mutton. The sergeant's wife, a pleasant-faced body in a white apron, attended to their wants; and while Trooper Blayney ate and mopped, she manipulated the beer-jug with no niggard hand.

'It's a terrible dry-thirst I have on me, Mrs Wiggan,' said the trooper. 'What wid the dust, an' the bellowin', an' the shoutin', I'm like a bit of the rale Saharey.'

'A trying day, Mr Blayney!'

'Tryin' isn't the word for't, ma'am; it's downright crool to animals. 'Tain't the likes uv me to be cursin' at me duty; but to stand all

day in the broilin' sun, wid never a pint to wash down the amazin' congregations uv dust, is enough to make a dacent man quit the foorce. Upon me sowl, I'd rather tackle the Kellys single-handed than go through such another awful day.'

'Um,' muttered the sergeant, a grim, thick-set man with an ugly scowl and a reputation for daring which made him the terror of evil-doers, 'that would be a nice mouthful—wouldn't it?' His equanimity had often been disturbed by the loquacity of his junior, whom he found a sore trial; but, being unable to do anything with the Irishman, he simply called him Irish—and that meant much.

'Och! it's not me that's belavin' all I hear about thim bushrangers,' said the trooper. 'I'm thinkin' it's as well for thim they're kapin' on the Victoree side uv the river. In New South Wales it would be a short rope for the blackguards.'

'What makes you think that?' asked the sergeant.

'Why, because over in Victoree they're a pack of fools. Think uv it. These varmints have been at large nigh on two years, and divil a dacent hand has yet been laid on their shoulder. Are ye tellin' me, sergeant, that we don't do things better than that in New South Wales?'

'There are difficulties, my friend,' replied the sergeant, 'and these bushrangers are the cleverest of all their breed. How would you get 'em out of the mountains?'

'Smoke 'em out, like varmin,' cried the trooper.

'Yes,' muttered the sergeant dryly, 'it's not a bad idea. I wonder the Victorians haven't thought of it.'

'What! Thim think uv anything—thim people over in Victoree! Sergeant, you amaze me—an' you livin' not sixty miles from the border! Be me faith! I only wish that Master Kelly would poke his dirty nose into Billabong. I'd tache the varmin that there's some intilligence in Australee, even if it is imported.'

'Talking about the Kellys,' said the sergeant's wife, who had re-entered the room in time to catch this heroic outburst, 'have you heard the latest?'

Her husband looked up inquiringly from under his brows, his one method of interrogating her.

'And what's that?' said the trooper.

'It may only be rumour; it probably is—one
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hears so many; but they say that the bush-rangers have crossed the Murray.'

The sergeant's brows went together and his little eyes narrowed strangely; but the sergeant's junior burst out laughing.

'Divil a fear of that,' said he. 'They know better than trust their necks in New South Wales. Besides, ma'am, how do you imagine that they are goin' to cross the river with our police guardin' the bank?'

'I suppose,' said the sergeant's wife apologetically, 'that it is only another of the many rumours that are flying about. Of course, people have got to believe the Kellys capable of anything; and the mere thought of them being in New South Wales is enough to upset the nerves of every soul along the border.'

'You've precious little cause for alarm, Mrs Wiggan—more's the sorrow. It's meself that would like to have a shot at the two thousand pound. It's a reward worthy uv a prince. It's bad luck to me that I'm not away over in Victoree at the present moment, where an honest man might so easily make a fortune. Never a bushranger shall we ever git in Billabong.'

'I hope not,' said the sergeant's wife, casting a meaning look at her husband.

'An' it's you that 'ud be denyin' your poor boy the chance uv gettin' his fist into two thousand pound?' exclaimed the trooper. 'An' it's you're the princess—are you?—that's turnin' your nose up at that thriffin' sum? Mrs Wiggan, I'm amazed at ye.'

'The reward has to be won, Mr Blayney,' explained the woman; 'won with the rifle, you understand?'

'I doubt it, ma'am—or at any rate in the way you mane. Take me word for't, this Kelly is a cowardly blackguard at bottom, terrorisin' ould men an' women. Wait till he meets a man.'

'Like you, Irish!' laughed the sergeant.

'Like anybody who's not afraid to look down the barrel of a pistol. I only hope your information is right, ma'am, an' that the bushrangers have crossed the river, an' that they'll take it into their heads to come as far as Billabong. Sure, it's a mighty fine reception they'll find awaitin' thim. We'll go through thim, me boy, as the divil went through Athlone.'

'And how was that?' asked the sergeant.

'Wid standin' lapes,' said the trooper.

The sergeant rose from the table, and, with his wife, quitted the room; Trooper Blayney, rising also, strolled out to the veranda to smoke a pipe preparatory to resuming duty. In ordinary times of peace the guardianship of the town and of the surrounding district devolved upon the sergeant and his subordinate, but upon gala occasions they were reinforced by a couple of men from an adjacent township. It 1900.]

was these two men who were at that moment on duty, and who presently would have to be relieved by the sergeant and the heroic Blayney.

The trooper lay back in an easy-chair in the shade of the veranda, and gave himself up to the enjoyment of his pipe and his thoughts. The one drew freely and the other ran pleasantly—very pleasantly indeed; for he pictured himself arresting, single-handed, the notorious gang of bushrangers, and of placing to his banking account the huge reward of two thousand pounds. It meant a life of ease and a return to the old country, where, in imagination, he already beheld himself the admiration and envy of every boy in the village. What a tale it would be, and how he would tell it over and over again: how he, Terence Blayney, had run to earth the great bushrangers! Heavens! there was immortality in the thought. And Molly MacCarthy—what would she say, the jade?

The police-quarters stood at the far or western end of the street, and were composed of the house which the sergeant and his assistant occupied, and the lock-up—an ugly, square, squat erection constructed of rough-hewn logs. These buildings, standing some hundred yards back from the roadway, lent to the town that air of imposing dignity which one always associates with a jail; and the trooper, as he rolled an occasional eye towards the squat, square prison-house, thought of Kelly, and chains, and two thousand pounds.

It was that time of the day when people who have no business abroad prefer to remain within doors, and consequently but few persons passed before the half-closed eyes of the trooper. But at last, in the midst of a cloud of dust, a solitary equestrian drew up before the gate, and taking a quick glance up and down the road, trotted boldly into the police-yard, up to the veranda, and drew rein before the trooper. Dismounting, the man threw the rein loosely on his horse's neck, patted the animal fondly, whispered something in its ear, and then turned to the policeman.

The new-comer was an extremely handsome man, standing a good six feet in height, broad in proportion, and yet sloping away finely at the flanks, which gave to him an appearance of agility not often found with big men. He wore a full brown beard, a slouch-hat, riding breeches and boots, and a loose-throated shirt. Altogether an ideal bushman, with the freedom of the bush in every one of his agile movements.

The man advanced to the steps of the veranda and saluted the trooper: 'Are you Sergeant Wiggan?'

'No,' said Blayney; 'but that doesn't matter.'

'Not in the least. Is the sergeant in?'

'He was a moment ago,' and he nodded towards the back of the house. 'What do you want?'

'My business is with the sergeant,' replied the man, who by this time had mounted the veranda, and with each word had drawn closer to the trooper.

'Oh, is it?' cried Blayney, with a sneer. 'And may I ask who the mischief are you—anyway?'

'Ned Kelly,' said the stranger in a low voice. 'Up with your hands.'

Blayney sat back with a gasp. His limbs stiffened; his pipe fell from his ashy lips. Wide-staring eyes fixed themselves helplessly upon Kelly's face, while, quick as lightning, the bushranger's hands went over the trooper's body.

'It's a joke, uv coorse?' But there was no ray of humour in the bushranger's eye or in the muzzle of the pistol into which the trooper suddenly found himself looking.

'That all depends on you. Make a sign, utter a cry, and you're a dead man. Now get up—quick! Have you any one in the lock-up?'

'No.'

'Then march. Remember, a sound and I'll blow your brains out.'

It was only a few steps from the veranda to the lock-up, and, urged by the bushranger, Blayney fairly rushed the distance, Kelly's horse following at his master's heels.

'Sure, an' what is it ye intind doin' wid me, Mr Kelly?' whined the trooper.

'Nothing. Shut up!'

The heavy door was open as if in anticipation, and Kelly entered the cell with his victim.

'Now listen,' said he; 'I'm going to lock you up here for a time, but no harm will come to you if you behave yourself.'

'Sure, an' why shouldn't I, Mr Kelly dear?'

But the bushranger made no reply. Throwing a hasty but comprehensive glance round the cell, he withdrew, shooting the heavy bolts behind him. A grim smile of satisfaction stole over his bronzed face as he turned once more to the private quarters. Renowned as the most daring of all the bad men who had ever taken to evil ways, no such desperate and daring feat as this which he now contemplated had ever been known in the annals of bushranging.

With a quick step he once more mounted the veranda; but this time he entered boldly at the front door, stood for a moment to listen, and locating the sound of voices, strode rapidly forward.

'Bail up, sergeant!'

The sergeant, who had been sitting with his back to the door, sprang hastily to his feet, the

fighting spirit surging like fire through his blood; but the sight of the levelled pistol and the hard face behind it checked whatever inclination to struggle he might have entertained. Although he had no weapon on him, his hand instinctively went to his hip.

'None of that, sergeant. Up with 'em! Up with 'em—d'ye hear!' repeated the man harshly.

The sergeant looked fiercely from side to side; but as he saw no chance of escape or assistance, up, very slowly, went his hands above his head.

Kelly went over him with the ease of an expert, and found nothing but a bunch of keys.

'So,' he said, 'you had nothing there after all. Why did you make that movement?'

'Instinct, I suppose,' growled the sergeant.

'Do you know, man, you were only one second off eternity.'

The sergeant was a brave man, but he quailed.

'Who are you?' he asked. 'Kelly?'

'Yes.'

Mrs Wiggan gave a groan and collapsed in her seat.

'Don't be frightened, ma'am,' said the bushranger. 'We don't make war on women. It's a game between us and the police.'

'Then you will kill my husband?'

'Not a hair of his head shall be harmed if he obeys. But, you understand, I am not to be trifled with. Now, sergeant, I must lock you and your good lady up for a few hours. My friends and I have a call to make in the town. It may prove a trifle inconvenient to you, but it is a matter of stern necessity to us. This way, if you please. Kindly take your husband's arm, ma'am. Thanks. The sergeant is forgetting his manners.'

They passed out through the back door and round by the side of the house, the sergeant and his wife arm in arm, the bushranger bringing up the rear. In that short journey from the door to the lock-up a dozen desperate thoughts flashed through the sergeant's mind; but the knowledge that Kelly was behind him made him pause—Kelly, who shot so straight, whose neck was already in the noose. Yet the humiliation was bitter as death, and he ground his teeth and inwardly cursed his impotence.

When the door was flung open and he beheld the crestfallen Blayney, the sergeant almost laughed.

'Hullo, Irish!' he said grimly. 'Kelly has come to Billabong.'

'But only for a short visit,' said the bushranger. 'Sorry to inconvenience you, ma'am; but you'll be able to keep each other company.' Then he once more shot the bolts upon them, and this time locked the heavy padlocks with the keys he had taken from the sergeant.

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Leading his horse into the shade at the side of the house, he then went back to the veranda, and, filling a pipe, threw himself contentedly into the chair which Trooper Blayney had but lately occupied. So far the outlaw's plans had worked to perfection, the great secret of the fellow's success being that he had a head on his shoulders and a spirit daring enough to attempt the unexpected. His plans for attacking a town or a station were invariably laid with the utmost skill, and the courage with which he carried out operations was a guarantee of success.

Nevertheless, as he sat smoking, apparently unconcerned, his eyes darted quick glances up and down the road. His ears were on the alert for the slightest sound; and presently, as the clatter of hoofs drew near, he half-rose in his seat and peered anxiously in the direction from which the noise came. In a few moments a horseman appeared riding towards the town, and Kelly now stood bolt-upright and showed himself by the veranda steps. The rider did not seem to notice him; but, all the same, as he passed the station gates a piece of white paper was seen to flutter from his saddle. Kelly drew himself up. A strange, hard look appeared about his mouth and in his eyes, and with a stiffening of the muscles, as it were, he crossed once more to the lock-up.

'I am going to open the door,' he cried, 'but the Irishman only is to come out. If you attempt a rush, sergeant, you're a dead man.'

Kelly knew that, dead or alive, he was worth the sum of two thousand pounds—for such a price had been placed upon his head—and that nothing short of the absolute certainty of losing their own lives would stop them from attempting to capture him. But fortunately for him there is much power in an evil reputation, and rumour had not lessened his. As a consequence, his name alone commanded the utmost respect, and the cry, 'Bail up! I am Ned Kelly,' was enough to send the valour helter-skelter out of a man.

In this instance nothing was attempted. He undid the bolts and stepped back, calling upon Trooper Blayney to push the door open. This that worthy did, and stepping out, beheld fate, in the person of the bushranger, standing by with a revolver in his hand.

'Now shut that door,' said Kelly peremptorily. 'I want you.'

'Yes, Mr Kelly.'

Blayney obeyed without demur. Indeed, it is highly probable that he enjoyed shutting the bolts on his superior officer. Kelly himself saw to the locking, and then re-entered the house with the trooper.

'Now,' said he, 'you and I are going for a stroll through the town. Have you a tunic and a helmet that will fit me?'

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'The sergeant is not as tall as you, Mr Kelly; but he's powerful broad, and he has a terrible big head.'

The sergeant's coat and helmet were lying across an arm of the sofa, and into these Kelly quickly got. The former was a trifle small, and considerably short in the arms; but the latter fitted well enough, and the bushranger seemed perfectly pleased with the transformation.

'Well,' said he, turning towards the trooper, who, spell-bound, gazed admiringly upon the outlaw, 'no one will expect to find Ned Kelly inside a policeman's uniform—eh?'

'Be the powers, no! An' it's a rare iligant trooper you make, Mr Kelly; an' sorrow's me that ye weren't brought up to the force.'

'Well, I've joined it now,' replied the outlaw, with a grim smile. 'Better late than never.'

The trooper could scarcely realise that this talkative, affable, handsome man was the notorious Kelly, the man whose unparalleled daring filled the whole of Australia with wonder, fear, and admiration; the man who had practically wrecked a Ministry and hurled sundry high officials from office; the man who held with a grip of terror the whole of the north-eastern district of Victoria. And this bogie, this spectre, this terror, was here now, talking like an ordinary man—and surely, like an ordinary man, he could be as easily overcome.

The thought flashed like lightning through the trooper's brain. But one blow—one good blow—and it was two thousand golden pounds in his pocket! Think of it—two thousand golden pounds! The trooper was a powerful young man. If he could only make sure of his spring; if he could only catch the outlaw off his guard. But if he failed? This made him pause, as it had made so many men pause before. For Kelly was a man already doomed to the rope or the bullet; a crime more or less was nothing in his awful indictment. He would shoot, and shoot straight, at the first sign of treachery. Trooper Blayney decided to postpone his attack.

Kelly looked the policeman closely in the eyes, and fingered his revolver in a way that made Blayney's flesh creep. It seemed to him that his thoughts lay white and bare to those dark, penetrating eyes, and he shivered as he watched the forefinger curl round the trigger.

'For hiven's sake, Mr Kelly dear, turn away that bastely wipon. Suppose by any chance it should go off?'

'It will not go off—unless you make it. Now, listen to me. You and I are going for a stroll through the town. I have some business there, and if I go with you no one will suspect. I have no doubt that you will have plenty of opportunities of betraying me; but the moment

you make sign or word—remember, that moment will be your last.’

‘Oh, Mr Kelly dear, for what would I betray you?’

‘Two thousand pounds,’ said the bushranger grimly. ‘Remember, my name’s Maloney, and I’m a trooper from over the border.’

‘Come to sarch for the Kellys mayhap?’

‘Mayhap. You understand?’

‘Perfectly.’

As the real and the false policeman strolled down the station-yard and out on to the foot-path, they almost immediately passed a man leading a horse. The fellow was not to be distinguished from the ordinary run of bushmen, except that the horse he led seemed of a better blood and quality than usually fell to the lot of such people. Indeed, the trooper was so busy watching the horse that he did not see the look which passed between Kelly and the man.

‘A mighty fine piece of horseflesh,’ said the trooper. ‘I wonder where that vagabond got it?’

‘Shook it,’ replied the bushranger.

‘I can quite belave you. What would the likes uv him be doin’ wid a bit uv blood like that?’ He looked round after the man. ‘Be the powers, he’s interin’ the station!’

‘Yes,’ muttered Kelly laconically. ‘I told him to.’

‘Oh, thin he’s one uv your friends, Mr Kelly?’

Kelly smiled. ‘Yes.’

‘If it wouldn’t be rude, might I inquire his name?’

‘Steve Hart,’ said the outlaw.

A peculiarly horrid shiver ran down the constable’s back.

‘Thin, is it that you’re all here?’ he asked in a frightened whisper.

‘We are all here.’

They walked on in silence for some little distance, the policeman vainly cudgelling his brains to discover some safe method by which he could give the alarm. What a glorious stroke of fortune it would be, and what an honour for Billabong, if they could only lay this gang of scoundrels by the heels! After all, there were only four of them. It would be a lasting shame to Billabong, and an irreparable loss to their pockets, if they permitted the ruffians to get clear away.

As they advanced deeper into the town the adventure grew more exciting. People saluted them right and left, and Kelly always returned the salute. The trooper perspired freely. Why would not these stupid people see that this supposed policeman was no policeman at all, but the notorious outlaw who was worth, dead or alive, two thousand golden pounds? He could have shrieked it aloud; and he would have only for that grim

face so close to his, and the awful knowledge that the right hand, which Kelly kept in his pocket, held a revolver. Indeed, between Blayne and eternity there was only the lining of a coat.

A crowd of noisy men blocked up the foot-path before a hotel. ‘Now,’ thought the trooper, ‘this is my opportunity. If I call they are bound to take him.’ True—there was no doubt of that; but should he live to witness the capture? Or—this was a more serious thought—should he benefit by the reward? Kelly, as if reading the man’s thoughts, pressed closer to the side of his companion and linked arms with him. Trooper Blayne had not yet decided to speak.

About a hundred yards farther on they stopped beneath the veranda of the Union Bank, the doors of which were still open.

‘They work late in Billabong?’ said the outlaw.

‘Not usually; but this is a special occasion.’ The trooper smiled. By the powers! had Kelly’s appearance in Billabong anything to do with the big banking transactions of the annual sale? He knew that Kelly had a weakness for banks. Indeed, that redoubtable personage had a contempt for anything beneath the dignity of such flourishing institutions. He was no ordinary highway robber who stopped coaches and relieved the frightened passengers of their purses. Kelly dealt in big things.

As they were about to pass on they were suddenly confronted by another trooper, who came upon them unexpectedly from round a corner. Kelly had just time to whisper in Blayne’s ear, ‘Remember!’ when the guardian of the law advanced. It was a ticklish moment for the outlaw, and his heart beat a throb or two quicker; but his face preserved its usual imperturbable calm. His fingers tightened on the hidden revolver.

‘Well?’ said the new arrival, advancing with a smile. He was a pleasant-faced man, and evidently one with whom the world went well.

‘The top o’ the afternoon,’ said Blayne in a strange, quivering voice. ‘How’s things?’

‘Quiet,’ said the man, looking hard at Kelly.

‘Ah! we’re a model lot in Billabong,’ was the reply. ‘But, Johnson, me boy, let me introduce you to me fri’nd Maloney from over the Victoree side.’

‘Glad to meet you,’ said Trooper Johnson. ‘And how’s things in Victoria?’

‘Dull,’ said Kelly.

‘Look at that now, and the bushrangers still at large.’

‘It’s to sarch for thim same bushrangers that me fri’nd Maloney has come into New South Wales.’

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The trooper laughed. 'I don't think they'll venture our side of the river. Victoria is much safer.'

'So I told my sergeant,' said Kelly, with a laugh. 'But where was the officer who ever listened to a subordinate?'

The man, who had been studying Kelly intently, laughed.

'Queer words to come from one who wears the stripes,' said he, pointing to the sergeant's badge on Kelly's arm. The bushranger felt a peculiar, hopeless sensation pass through him, but no sign of it fluttered across his immobile face. The furrow between his brows deepened infinitesimally as his eyes caught those of Blayney. That worthy had insensibly sidled towards the other trooper, but Kelly's look brought him to a standstill. With a smile the bushranger explained the apparent incongruity.

'This is a coat I borrowed from Sergeant Wiggan. You might have guessed it wasn't mine by the fit.'

'Nor the helmet either,' replied the man, with a laugh. 'You haven't adopted our shape yet in Victoria?'

'No; but we're hoping to. The fact is, I had an accident with my own, and so you behold me in borrowed plumes.'

The man laughed, Kelly laughed, but Trooper Blayney laughed loudest of all. It was like a play, and much more exciting. The cool effrontery of the outlaw filled the trooper with admiration. No wonder the country was ringing with the unparalleled daring of this man. Already he fancied he could hear the huge guffaw go up from the length and breadth of Australia when it learned how Kelly came to Billabong.

The three men strolled onward chatting amicably, Kelly very considerably placing himself in the middle, with Trooper Blayney on his right hand—the hand that held the revolver.

'So you've come over to look for the Kellys?' said Trooper Johnson.

'Bad luck to them!' replied the bushranger. Blayney started to giggle, but Kelly, moving close to him, pressed something hard against the Irishman's side. It was something more than a joke.

'But what on earth brings you to Billabong?'

'Haven't you heard the latest rumour?' asked Kelly.

'No. What's that?'

'It is said that the outlaws have crossed the border.'

'They've said that a dozen times,' replied the trooper complacently. 'I don't believe a word of it. Kelly's no fool. He knows when he's well off. He'll stick to the ranges in Victoria until he's smoked out.'

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'A difficult process,' said the bushranger. 'They say he's pretty clever.'

'Pooh! I should like to know where it comes in. If the Victorians had a man with an ounce of brains or a pound of courage, the vermin would have been exterminated long ago.'

'Tell me, Johnson, me dear man,' said Blayney, who, notwithstanding the fact that the words 'two thousand pounds' kept ringing in his ears, had enough humour left to appreciate the situation, 'what would ye do now if ye were brought face to face wid Ned himself?'

The trooper shook his head and smiled sadly. 'No such luck.'

'A smart man like you, Johnson, would do the thrick, I'm thinkin'.'

'I should like to get the chance,' said Mr Johnson.

During the whole of this time Blayney assiduously racked his brains for an inspiration, but no feasible—that is, safe—plan presented itself. It was maddening to think that this audacious rascal who strolled so complacently between them was worth two thousand pounds, a thousand each for him and Johnson if he could only tip that dunderhead the office. Sometimes the temptation to risk all, to call out, 'Arrest this man: he is Ned Kelly!' was so great that it was with difficulty he snapped his teeth on the words. For one thing, Johnson, like the rest of the world, was so sure that Kelly was in Victoria that he would have regarded the cry as a joke, and disdained to move accordingly. But another and more serious reason dissuaded Blayney from the attempt. That cry would probably be his last on earth, and the Irishman had not found life so hard that he was in an exceeding hurry to quit it.

They left Johnson to resume his beat, and slowly retraced their steps through the town. Dozens of eyes marked Kelly, but no one saw in him the redoubtable bushranger. It was merely, 'Who's the new trooper with Blayney?' and nothing more. And so they passed on, and as they approached the police-station once more Blayney knew that his chances of winning that reward had diminished almost to vanishing-point, and the perspiration fairly oozed from him, and he felt wickedly desperate.

Opposite the station gates stood a four-wheeled trap, and in it sat a young man nonchalantly smoking a pipe. This individual, a low-browed, scowling rascal, grinned quite pleasantly as Kelly and the trooper approached.

'Well?' he cried.

'All right. You can drive on.'

The trap instantly moved off.

'Who's that?' asked the trooper.

'Dan,' was the answer.

The trooper looked furtively over his shoulder at the retreating buggy. So that was Dan

Kelly, the brother of the truculent ruffian by his side, the youngest member of this gang of desperadoes, and yet the one who bore the most evil reputation of them all. Despair seized upon him, and he sighed aloud. His chance of winning the reward had vanished utterly. Kelly had laid his plans too well to fail. If the trooper had not felt so deeply, desperately annoyed at the loss of the two thousand pounds, he might have admired the outlaw greatly. For there was a daring, a courage here which commanded admiration; and Blayne was too good a sportsman to decry a brave adversary.

As they crossed the police-yard the ruffian whom Kelly had called Steve Hart appeared on the veranda, hands in pockets, pipe in mouth,

the very embodiment of cool effrontery, and to him Kelly handed over the trooper. He accepted the duty with a grin, and presently the lock-up received Blayne once again, and he was left to regale the sergeant and the sergeant's trembling wife with a recital of his walk through Billabong with the outlaw.

About a quarter of an hour afterwards, those who were in the immediate vicinity of the Union Bank saw the trooper from Victoria enter the building; but it was not until the next morning that the people knew Kelly had come to Billabong, that he had 'stuck up' the bank, and that it was consequently five thousand pounds the poorer for his visit.

PARTING—AND AFTER.

The moonlight once again is here,
The moving months with joy I see;
The passing weeks are bringing near
The time when Norah comes to me.

The precious moments quickly flew,
And fast the final hour drew nigh
When I to home must bid adieu,
And to my sweetheart say good-bye.

A ling'ring kiss, a long embrace,
Low words, a last fond look, a prayer;
Then growing distance dimmed her face:
Parted? I hardly knew we were.

To her my heart has ever turned
E'er since that separation-day,

When flying train and fleeting ship
Bore me so fast and far away.

The skies were dull, the trees were bare,
And autumn winds with winter blew;
I left her in the city there,
Silent and sad and tearful too,

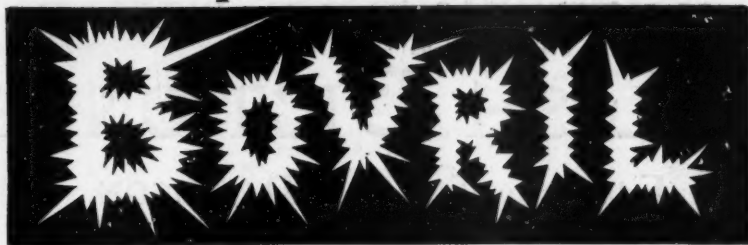
Because an anxious, doubtful year,
By weary waiting longer made,
Loomed up between her love and her,
And made her maiden heart afraid.

With holy joy and deep delight
We hail the coming of the time
When sundered hearts shall reunite,
And she for ever shall be mine.

G. G. G.



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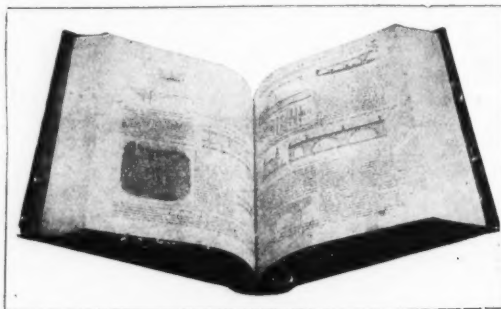
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